



*Research Article*

# Women's Empowerment through Social Media: A Comparative Study of Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia

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## Abstract

In today's world, social media are one of the most effective tools that can be used to further women's empowerment efforts, which is a significant indicator of a country's overall level of development. Before social media, women suffered a lot, especially when they lacked knowledge. However, through social media, women's empowerment is rapidly growing as social media are easy to access, and they are learning more about their rights and powers. This article discusses the definition of women's empowerment as well as the definition of social media in an effort to achieve its purpose. First and foremost, the purpose of this research is to provide an overview of how far social media have contributed to women's empowerment. Further, this article will analyse women's empowerment in Brunei and Malaysia using a comparative approach. In the end, it can be concluded that despite the fact that there is no doubt that women in today's society have access to numerous social media platforms that support them in their day-to-day lives and assist them in empowering themselves, there are obstacles, such as cybercrime, that prevent women from upholding their empowerment. It is recommended that each country must provide and improve its national policies and laws to protect women, particularly regarding their use of social media.

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment; Women's rights; Social Media

## Introduction

Women's empowerment is an interesting debate and a current global phenomenon. Ever since the establishment of the United Nations, experts from all around the globe have been interested in the subject of women's empowerment, and many nations have included this idea in their political agendas. (Mandal, 2013)

Women's empowerment is a concept of promoting women's basic fundamental rights, women's sense of self-worth, freedom of their own choice as well as their right to influence

On the other hand, social media have hit the world like no other trend before. (Kameke, 2023) In this modern era, social media play a vital role, especially in the realms of online communication, which made any communication possible through the use of computers and the Internet. (Shekhawat & Bhatt, March 2021) Accordingly, it is no doubt that people from all around the globe engage in various forms of social media as their daily routine activity. This is because of the great opportunity that social media can offer, such as communicating with one another, expressing themselves, and sharing content of all kinds. (Mrunal, 2023)

Social media have been shown to be a powerful instrument for empowering women. Several success stories have been presented as proof that social media continue to assist women in improving their quality of life and taking charge of their own lives. The use of social media by women was hampered by a number of issues, including basic and technological illiteracy, language hurdles, family responsibilities, stereotypes about women's roles in society and culture, and lower educational success among women than among males. (Abdul Hamid, et al., 2015)

As of 2022, there were 421,300 thousand social media users in Brunei Darussalam from its 443,500 thousand population, and almost half of the population is female. (Datareportal, 2022) Meanwhile, Malaysia recorded that there were 29.55 million social media users in Malaysia, and similarly, almost half of the 32.98 million total population were female. (Datareportal, 2022) This shows that although Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia are two examples of developing countries that did not define that the populations, especially women in these two

social change for themselves and others. (Ahari & Prajapat, 2022) Women have suffered a lot over the years, back in the early days. For instance, the fathers could sell their daughters, the husband could terminate the union at will, and women had little to no rights of succession. (Civilization, n.d.)

Over time, women realized their power, and women's empowerment rapidly grew around the globe. Due to this, they become aware of their rights and started to pay attention to their positions and rights in society instead of being dependent on men.

countries, are left behind by the usage of social media.

Despite this, women still encounter several challenges, such as cybercrime. Hence, this paper aims to define the terms of women's empowerment and social media. Subsequently, this paper will also discuss the progress and development of women's empowerment through social media in general and specifically in Brunei Darussalam as well as in Malaysia in terms of women's violence, education, and entrepreneurship. In addition, cybercrime has been one of the significant challenges for women to uphold their empowerment.

## Definition of Women's Empowerment and social media

Women's empowerment consists of two words. There is, however, no clear definition of women. According to Cambridge Dictionary, a woman can be defined as an adult female human being. (Dictionary, 1995) Similarly, there are vast definitions of empowerment. (Karl, 1995) is of opinion that empowerment is a word widely used, but seldom defined. Long before the word became popular, women were speaking about gaining control over their lives, getting involved in decision-making that affected them in the home and community, in government and international development government and international development policies. She further defines empowerment as the sense of gaining control of participating in decision-making.

According to (Rowlands, 1997), empowerment is construed as the power to participate within the economic and political structures of society. They should be given the opportunity to occupy positions of power in terms of political and economic decision-making. Meanwhile, (Stein, 1997) defines empowerment as a "social action

process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control over their lives in their community and larger societies”.

Further, the term empowerment is also defined by (Aspy & Sandhu, 1999) as “the process of gaining control over one’s own life while supporting and facilitating others’ control over their lives”. Goodrich has also described empowerment as “ a benevolent but unilateral transaction in which one person enhances another’s ability to feel competent and take action, that is, enhances another’s power-to” (Darlington & Mulvaney, 2003). In addition, not to mention, the World Bank has also defined empowerment as “the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets”. (Chattopadhyay, 2005)

Thus, (Sahay, 1998) defines the term women’s empowerment as “Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life.” This includes decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed, and powerless people who have not been able to participate in decision-making as well as the implementation of policies and programs for both government and non-government sectors.

From all these definitions, in our opinion, women’s empowerment is the process of women gaining power over themselves. The power of making own decisions, the power of being independent, and the power to influence others.

The well-being and socioeconomic advancement of families, communities, and nations worldwide depend on women’s empowerment. Women can pursue their full potential when they can live in a secure place, content, and fruitful lives. In addition, happy women can also raise happier and healthier children and contribute their skills to the workforce. Hence, this resulted in healthy economies and advanced societies, which will benefit all of humanity.

Women can realize their greatest potential when they lead securely, feel content, live fruitful lives, raise happier, healthier children, and contribute their skills to the workforce. They can also support healthy economies, advance societies,

and benefit all of humanity. In other words, women’s empowerment is the key to economic growth, political stability, and social transformations. (Vision, n.d.)

On the other hand, social media consist of two words. The word social means the interaction between people by giving and receiving information from one another. Meanwhile, the word media refers to the tool or tools used in carrying out the said interaction. (Dewing, 2010) Hence, from these definitions, it can be said that social media are basically a means of engaging with other people through tools, which in this context are the Internet.

This means that social media are a form of communication based on the Internet. There are many forms of social media such as photo-sharing sites, instant messages, blogs, podcasts, video-sharing sites, virtual communication through phone and video calls, and many others. (USF, 2023)

The core purposes of social media are to share information, make connections, and, foremost, just communicate despite the different areas of living. Hence, in general, social media give an individual the personal freedom to interact and communicate with loved ones, learn new things, explore new interests, and be entertained. In addition, by engaging with other professionals in business, social media can help to expand a professional network and deepen an individual’s knowledge in any specific field. Not only that, social media give any business the opportunity to interact with customers, gain customer feedback and elevate brand recognition. (USF, 2023)

In particular, social media act as a medium or platform for women to share and raise their voices when they are silenced. Women received a positive impact when they raised their voices through social media, where thousands of men and even women themselves supported each other’s voices and demonstrations. (Ibrahim, 2021)

### **A comparative study of Women’s empowerment through social media in Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia**

Social media have fundamentally transformed communication at national and international levels in recent decades. As stated before, there is a high number of social media users in both Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, which includes women. Social media are a new tool, weapon, or platform for women in this era to discuss, communicate and voice their opinion, organizing

campaigns and online activities. In other words, it is no doubt that the help and support from social media tools and applications such as blogs, vlogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can empower women by sharing their knowledge, influencing other women to be more robust and more independent as well as contributing in the national economic strength. (Kumari, 2020)

The importance of women's empowerment through social media elevated more in the wake of the outbreak of Covid-19. A lot of people have used social media to carry on their activities which was no longer possible to do so in person. There are many areas of women's empowerment that social media help to elevate. The discussion is as follows:

### ***Women Against Violence***

In the issue of women against violence, social media, and digital platforms, are becoming effective instruments for women as individuals or communities to fight for their basic fundamental rights which include their rights against violence. Many organizations from all around the globe use these platforms to interact with people, discuss women's rights, and offer advice and comments on their current affairs and difficulties. (Sarrats, 2022)

Hashtag movements to end violence and discriminations against women has been used to discuss views, share experience. Through social media, women across the globe are connected to support each other such as the lawmakers, politicians, business owners for gender equality's non-governmental organizations and etc. (Sarrats, 2022)

For instance: the use of hashtag #HeForShe, which is a solidarity movement to achieve gender equality. This movement was launched by the United Nations and the United Nations Women in 2014. The objective of this movement was to call on people regardless of their genders to join forces with women in the fight to close the gender gap. It was reported that about 1.2 billion people from all around the globe participated in the campaign, including well-known actresses such as Emma Watson, Anne Hathaway, Eddie Redmayne, and Tom Hiddleston. This movement is still going strong and is prevalent on Twitter. The campaign aims to close the gender gap, empower women financially and assist in eradicating violence against women while emphasizing gender equality in the workplace when it comes to employing new employees and,

foremost, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. (Culture, 2020)

Another example is the use of hashtags with the caption "#challengeaccepted". The phenomenon took place around 2020 when women posted black-and-white pictures of themselves on Instagram. The purpose of this Instagram challenge was to unite women across the globe to stand together against any violence and difficulties that women may face today. During this time, Instagram stories and posts from celebrities and non-celebrities alike flooded the social media app.

Yet, the tale behind the motivation for this challenge is far worse. There have recently been arising reports of femicide cases (the killing of women or girls, in particular by men and on account of their gender) in Turkey around 2020. The Turkish media would post black-and-white images of female victims of femicide every morning. Hence, women started uploading black-and-white images of themselves online to draw attention in Turkey and other countries. (Culture, 2020)

In Brunei Darussalam, social media have been utilized by the government and non-governmental organizations to promote women's empowerment and help women against violence. For instance, non-governmental organizations such as girls4girlsbrunei and Project Women Brunei have utilized social media such as Instagram and Zoom to conduct talk, spread awareness and share knowledge with women in various fields including the issue of violence that is experienced by women.

Similarly in Malaysia, various campaigns are conducted through social media to spread awareness, to uplift women's empowerment, and to help women against violence. Specifically, non-government organizations such as Lean in Malaysia, Women: girls, the G-Blog, and others, have utilized social media to empower women. Not to mention, non-governmental organizations such as the Joint Action Group must be credited for multiple campaigns and legal reform efforts which led to the enactment of the Domestic Violence Act 1994 and the inclusion of gender under Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution in 2001. Other examples of non-governmental organizations that help to support women's empowerment as well as women against violence are the Association of Women Lawyers (AWL), Women's Aid Organization (WAO), All Women's Action Society (AWAM), Women's

Centre for Change (WCC) and Tenaganita. (Faizli, 2017)

Hence, it can be said that social media are one of the effective tools for women to spread awareness and gain knowledge, especially in the area of women against violence as well as for their voice to be heard.

### **Education**

Education plays a vital role in women's empowerment. Women who receive an education can later pursue meaningful work and boost their nation's economy. (Vision, n.d.) Social media, on the other hand, act as a medium to give and acquire knowledge. (Dixit, 2020) The prime example can be seen during the pandemic of Covid19 where everyone all around the globe was required to stay at home and practice social distancing.

Brunei Darussalam is not an exception. Schools were announced closed during the pandemic. Activities such as eating in restaurants, mass gatherings, and any types of social gatherings are all prohibited. In addition, personal hygiene such as washing hands frequently with soap and water, or sanitizing them with alcohol-based hand sanitizers and social isolation were encouraged for everyone. This is one-nation approach carried by the government to break the chain of infections. (Suhaili, 2020)

During this time, lessons in schools were conducted online. Social media such as zoom and Microsoft office were the examples of social media platforms that were being utilized during the important moments to ensure that teachers can still conduct classes or lessons and students were not left behind.

Not only that, the Get Digital ASEAN program was launched in Brunei as a nationwide event in July 2020, following the lifting of Brunei's national lockdown, garnering substantial attention, particularly from university students and young people. A local non-governmental organization called Big BWN Project led Brunei's Go Digital ASEAN initiative.

The program formally started in August 2020 as a result of the realization that Brunei's Wawasan 2035 agenda requires economic diversification. It focuses on underemployed adolescents, disadvantaged neighborhoods, indigenous populations, and individuals with disabilities nationally. A combination of numerous

workshops and one-on-one coaching is used to carry out the project. (Ramli & Ha, 2021)

Furthermore, Big BWN is looking forward to assisting 2,000 youngsters who are underemployed, 450 people from marginalized communities, and 50 people with disabilities who are between the ages of 15 to 35. Fisha Rashid, the founder of Big BWN, announced that eight seminars would be hosted individually for marginalized populations and youngsters without jobs in each of Brunei's four districts. She mentioned that the major goal will be to increase their digital literacy so they can better access job possibilities and launch or expand their own businesses. The STEP Center of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports, as well as a number of other stakeholders like IBTE, AiTi, BAH Digital, and BruCERT, will support these workshops. (Wong, 2020)

Similarly, in Malaysia, during the pandemic, Covid19, teaching and learning from a school-oriented process has shifted to a virtual platform for online learning from home. However, several issues were addressed, such as the lack of technological infrastructures, limited Internet access as well as information technology not being fully applied due to technical difficulties. (S. Aisyah Sufian & Nasir, 2020) Therefore, UNESCO suggested that teachers be given immediate training to familiarize themselves with online learning techniques and given other facilities such as free Internet data, basic technological advice, education materials, and peer guidance in meeting students' needs. (UNESCO, 2020) Despite this challenge, it was proved that social media are an alternative tool for delivering knowledge.

Coursera, an online learning provider, has released a new study titled 'The Women and Skills Report' discussing Covid19's impact on online learning trends among women. The study reported that Malaysian women have higher ratings in online learning compared to pre-pandemic, which shows that women are more participative in certificate training programs for entry-level digital jobs. It further stated the percentage of women joining online learning increase from 43 percent in 2019 to 51 percent in 2021 in Malaysia.

### **Entrepreneurship**

Social media are becoming one of the most powerful tools for women to start their new businesses, companies, venture, or start-up, as

they can communicate with customers directly despite them living in different areas. Social media act as a virtual shop for women where they can buy and sell any item. Through social media, which are very cost-effective and easily accessible, entrepreneurs, including women, can take feedback and suggestions about their online products or services within short durations. (Kumari, 2020)

Social networking is part of the marketing strategy for female business owners. Women sharing their stories on social media platforms and documenting their entrepreneurial adventures often set an example for other women to follow. Because of this, women can develop stronger relationships with their target market and enhance the profitability of their company through sales and conversions. (Derfanian, 2022)

Although Brunei Darussalam is a small country, the advantages of social media are being utilized by more local women entrepreneurs to sell their products. (BruDirect, 2016) In addition, many workshops were conducted which aimed to assist businesswomen to establish their brands and online presence by setting up and maintaining active websites and social media account (WIEF, 2018).

Similarly, businesswomen in Malaysia have also utilized the convenience social media have to offer. A prime example can be seen especially during the outbreak of Covid-19 where many small and micro-sized enterprises in Malaysia use social media platforms to advertise and sell their goods and services. Some examples of social media platforms that are useful especially for advertising and marketing strategies are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok. (Hassan & Shahzad, 2022)

### **Challenge encountered by women in social media**

According to (Rai, 2021), despite all these positive impacts on women's empowerment, women encountered several challenges in upholding their empowerment. One of the major challenges is cybercrime. While social media have been used to uphold women's empowerment, they also have been used to silence the voices of women through online abuse, especially women in power and women journalists. According to (Gutierrez, 2017), studies have shown that although both genders, male and female, received threats, the threats

and attacks against women online are different from men.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development both place a strong emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment. Hence, an effective way to overcome this problem is to increase women's participation in social media (UNODC, 2022) and never give up on upholding women's empowerment. In addition, each country must provide national policy and legislation to protect women, especially in social media.

### **Conclusion**

Women's empowerment is the process of women gaining power over themselves. The power of making their own decisions, the power of being independent and the power to influence others. While social media are a means of engaging with other people through tools, which in this context are the Internet.

Social media have shown to be a powerful instrument for empowering women. Several success stories have been presented as proof that social media continue to assist women in improving their quality of life and taking charge of their own lives. This means that today's technology, such as social media, has assisted women's empowerment. It also enabled the world to hear their voices, educate them through the spread of awareness or conducting online classes or online talk, and also, assist women to build their own careers by getting involved in entrepreneurship. However, despite these positive impacts, there are several hurdles that come in the way of women's empowerment such as cybercrime. Studies have shown that men and women received different threats. To counter this problem, it is recommended that every country should provide national policy and legislation to protect women in social media and for women not to give up and increase their participation in social media.

Therefore, women's empowerment marks the overall development of a nation. Hence, we must celebrate women changing the world around them, and empower other women to do the same.

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