

## Women Left Behind? Closing the Gender Gap in Malaysia

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### I. Introduction

The involvement of Malaysian women in all spheres of life has become more visible over the years. This is primarily contributed by the advancement of women in education. In Malaysia, female educational attainment has increased substantially in the post-independence era. Female adult literacy increased from 61.3% in 1980 to 90.8% in 2010 (UNESCO 2016). In Malaysia, both boys and girls enjoy equal opportunity and access to education. Affordable education bridged gender disparities in primary and secondary education (UNICEF 2019).

Several important reforms took place in the Malaysian educational system which led to increased equality and equity in education opportunities. In 1970, a significant reform took place in the education system where the Malay language was introduced as the official medium of instruction in all government schools. The change was implemented at the tertiary level in the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> This reform was an important tool to integrate the multiracial society as well as to eradicate the poverty addressed in the New Economic Policy (NEP). The reform increased access to education especially for rural Malays whose native tongue was the Malay language (Ismail 2007). In the 1990s, the mounting demand for local tertiary education in the 1990s eventually led to a reform of the tertiary education system in Malaysia which included the privatisation of tertiary education institutions. The higher education reform saw the establishment of many new higher education institutions which increased the opportunities for tertiary education.

The gross enrolment in tertiary education increased from 7.0% in 1990 to 40.0% in 2009. By 2010, females in Malaysia made up 60.1% of the undergraduates in public universities (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2011). Nevertheless, “until the 1960s, there was a common belief in the society in general that women are ideally better off as housewives and when educated should be channelled into teaching, nursing or other feminine occupations” (Ariffin 1992, 55). The gender segregation as a result of gender stereotyping, which affected the student’s choice of courses, is still prevalent even at the tertiary education level where female students are more concentrated in the Arts stream than the Science streams (Karim 2009). Women in Malaysia tend to display a higher inclination than males for arts, science and technology subjects, rather than for technical and vocational training (UNICEF 2019).

In general, more education often reflects the changing tastes and preferences of females for labor market work. This is reflected in the gradual increment of the female labour force participation rate in Malaysia. Female labor force participation rate increased from 44.5% in 1982 to 49.5% in 2012 (Department of Statistics

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1. Due to the internationalisation in higher education from the 1990s, English is commonly used as the medium of instruction at present.

2019). In 2013, the female labor force participation rate surpassed the 50.0% mark for the first time and the rate is 54.7% in 2017. On the other hand, the male labor force participation rate was 85.3% in 1982 and this has decreased over the decades to 79.7% in 2011. The male labor force participation rate then increased slightly to 80.5% in 2012 and remains at 80.1% in 2017. The gender gap in labor force participation has narrowed significantly between 1982 and 2017 from 40.8% to 25.4%. The closing of the gender gap is due to both a slight decline in male labor force participation rate and an increase in female labor force participation.

A report from ILO (2011) however indicates that female labors remain an underutilised resource in many Asian economics, with low participation rates. In the context of the ASEAN region, the female labor force participation rate in Malaysia has been one of the lowest. In the year 2008, female labor participation rate in Malaysia at 45.7% is relatively lower as compared to neighbouring Singapore (60.2%), Thailand (70.0%) and Indonesia (51.8%) (Economic Planning Unit 2010).

This is of concern given the country's immediate policy targeting. In the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020) the government has targeted an increase in the female labor force participation rate to 57.0% by the year 2020 (Economic Planning Unit 2015). The effort to increase female labor force participation in Malaysia therefore continues to be one of the key focus areas for the country.

## **II. The women's involvement in Malaysian economy**

Malaysia has undergone a remarkable economic transformation and structural change in the 50 years since independence, moving from a low income, agriculture-based rural economy to a middle-income, manufacturing and service-based urban economy and now to an upper-middle-income, knowledge-based service economy (Leete 2007). The transformation of the Malaysian economic structure consequently affects the pattern of female labor force participation in the country.

In the period post-independence, Malaysia shifted from an agriculture-based to a manufacturing-based country in the 1970s with the introduction of export-oriented industrialisation policies. The industrial development in this sector saw a surge in the demand for young female workers, described by Ariffin (1992, 423) as an “exodus of female labor migration from rural areas to the urban-based factories.” The country experienced major growth in industries such as electronics, food processing, plastics, textiles and garments (Ariffin 1992, 25). When Malaysia was badly hit by the world recession in the 1980s, the country shifted its focus to resource-based higher technology which is more capital intensive (Ariffin 1992, 26). At the same time, the service sector expanded rapidly in the 1980s, especially in education and public administration (Ariffin 1992, 27; Athukorala 2001).

### ***Employment by industry and sex***

In terms of industry, most female workers are employed in the wholesale and retail trade, followed by manufacturing, education and accommodation and food service activities (Table 1). While male workers are also mostly employed in the manufacturing and wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, they are also more dominant in the agriculture, forestry and fishing and construction sector. This trend of employment especially for female workers are expected to continue into the near future.

In Malaysia, there is virtually no barrier for females to enter any industry or occupations. However, the differences between the number of males and females in any industry or occupations might reflect the choices and aspirations of the Malaysian females. Career occupations or field of study can be affected by an individual's family, interest, past experiences, stereotyping or to some extent salary.

### ***Employment by occupation and sex***

In 2015, approximately 46.0% of the 5.38 million female workers are employed as service and sales workers, as well as clerical support workers whereas 18.4% male workers are employed as service and sales workers (Table 2). However, most male workers are involved in elementary occupations, craft and related trade work, and plant and machine operation and assembling.

Table 1. Number of employed persons by industry and sex, 2015

| Industry   | Male    |       | Female  |       |
|--|---------|-------|---------|-------|
|  | ('000)  | (%)   | ('000)  | (%)   |
| Agriculture, forestry and fishing                                    | 1,328.2 | 15.3  | 425.7   | 7.9   |
| Mining and quarrying   | 87.1    | 1.0   | 17.3    | 0.3   |
| Manufacturing  | 1,438.3 | 16.5  | 884.3   | 16.4  |
| Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply                  | 51.5    | 0.6   | 10.3    | 0.2   |
| Water supply, sewerage, waste management and remediation activities  | 61.2    | 0.7   | 10.9    | 0.2   |
| Construction   | 1,195.6 | 13.8  | 114.3   | 2.1   |
| Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles | 1,400.5 | 16.1  | 961.0   | 17.9  |
| Transportation and storage   | 532.9   | 6.1   | 82.2    | 1.5   |
| Accommodation and food service activities                            | 583.0   | 6.7   | 567.9   | 10.6  |
| Information and communication  | 141.7   | 1.6   | 72.5    | 1.3   |
| Financial and insurance / takaful activities                         | 162.0   | 1.9   | 192.4   | 3.6   |
| Real estate activities   | 40.9    | 0.5   | 30.4    | 0.6   |
| Professional, scientific and technical activities                    | 186.9   | 2.2   | 172.4   | 3.2   |
| Administrative and support service activities                        | 407.9   | 4.7   | 226.9   | 4.2   |
| Public administration and defence; compulsory social security        | 517.2   | 6.0   | 233.8   | 4.3   |
| Education  | 286.2   | 3.3   | 612.8   | 11.4  |
| Human health and social work activities                              | 110.0   | 1.3   | 463.0   | 8.6   |
| Arts, entertainment and recreation                                   | 52.2    | 0.6   | 29.5    | 0.5   |
| Other service activities   | 100.0   | 1.2   | 133.1   | 2.5   |
| Activities of households as employers                                | 6.6     | 0.1   | 135.7   | 2.5   |
| Total  | 8,691.1 | 100.0 | 5,376.7 | 100.0 |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

Table 2. Number of employed persons by occupation and sex, 2015

| Occupation   | Male    |       | Female  |       |
|--|---------|-------|---------|-------|
|  | ('000)  | (%)   | ('000)  | (%)   |
| Managers   | 556.7   | 6.4   | 161.9   | 3.0   |
| Professionals                                      | 640.6   | 7.4   | 821.5   | 15.3  |
| Technicians and associate professionals            | 926.1   | 10.7  | 480.8   | 8.9   |
| Clerical support workers                           | 351.1   | 4.0   | 890.0   | 16.6  |
| Service and sales workers                          | 1,601.5 | 18.4  | 1,587.4 | 29.5  |
| Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers | 713.2   | 8.2   | 227.1   | 4.2   |
| Craft and related trade workers                    | 1,275.7 | 14.7  | 303.1   | 5.6   |
| Plant and machine operators and assemblers         | 1,278.4 | 14.7  | 306.8   | 5.7   |
| Elementary occupations                             | 1,347.8 | 15.5  | 598.1   | 11.1  |
| Total  | 8,691.1 | 100.0 | 5,376.7 | 100.0 |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

### *Number of registered professionals by sex*

The number of registered female professionals in 2015 is slightly more than male professionals (Table 3). A total of 66.2% of all dentists is females. Other professionals with females making up slightly more than half of the total professionals registered include accountants and lawyers. This is followed by medical doctors, quantity surveyors, veterinary surgeons and psychiatrist.

In 2018, the percentage of women professional and technical workers is 44.7%, almost equal to men. However, the percentage of women legislators, senior officials and managers is only 22.2%. Out of 37 minister positions in 2017, only 8.6% was women. The government's target of 30.0% women in corporate decision-making positions have yet to be fulfilled. Additionally, Malaysian females still face a glass ceiling at the top levels of the workplace which inhibits career development and promotion opportunities (Dimovski, Skerlavaj and Mok 2010).

Table 3. Number of registered professionals by sex, 2015

| Profession                       | Total<br>(‘000) | Male<br>(‘000) | Female |              |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------|--------------|
|                                  |                 |                | (‘000) | (% of total) |
| Accountants                      | 31,395          | 15,252         | 16,143 | 51.4         |
| Professional architects          | 1,891           | 1,549          | 342    | 18.1         |
| Architects                       | 1,923           | 1,245          | 678    | 35.3         |
| Professional engineers           | 16,746          | 15,869         | 877    | 5.2          |
| Graduate engineers               | 85,417          | 64,905         | 20,512 | 24           |
| Dentists                         | 6,054           | 2,044          | 4,010  | 66.2         |
| Medical doctors                  | 36,042          | 18,574         | 17,468 | 48.5         |
| Veterinary surgeons              | 2,083           | 1,163          | 920    | 44.2         |
| Land surveyors                   | 453             | 446            | 7      | 1.5          |
| Quantity surveyors               | 2,508           | 1,394          | 1,114  | 44.4         |
| Lawyers                          | 16,537          | 7,986          | 8,551  | 51.7         |
| Obstetricians and gynaecologists | 643             | 396            | 247    | 38.4         |
| Psychiatrist                     | 158             | 91             | 67     | 42.4         |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

## **III. Characteristics of female labor force in Malaysia**

### *Labor force participation by educational attainment*

The labor force participation rates by highest certificate in Table 4 shows that most females in the labor force have at least a certificate. The participation level of females with secondary school or lower is low (less than 55.0%). Females with higher education is more likely to be in the labor force. This is consistent with the human capital theory that predicts positive returns for investment in education.

### *Labor force participation by marital status*

The labor force participation for males and females by marital status is shown in Table 5. In terms of percentage, the proportion of married males and females in the labor market is very similar at 62.0 and 61.6%. There are more widowed and divorce or separated females than males in the labor force. This is consistent with the increasing number of female heads of household in the country.

The number of female heads of household has increased over the decades (Table 6). This implies the needs for women to be involved in labor market activities as women are expected to provide for their family. Dual earners family is becoming a trend in Malaysian households to the rise in cost of living. Women who are divorced, permanently separated or widowed are also more likely to work.

Table 4. Labor force participation rates by highest certificate obtained and sex, 2015

(Unit: %)

| Highest certificate obtained                    | Total | Male | Female |
|---|-------|------|--------|
| Total   | 67.9  | 80.6 | 54.1   |
| UPSR/UPSRA or equivalent (primary school)       | 64.2  | 81.1 | 42.0   |
| PMR/SRP/LCE/SRA or equivalent (lower secondary) | 53.3  | 67.2 | 35.6   |
| SPM or equivalent (O-level)                     | 69.0  | 82.5 | 54.5   |
| STPM or equivalent (A-level)                    | 53.8  | 63.4 | 47.3   |
| Certificate                                     | 88.2  | 93.2 | 78.0   |
| Diploma   | 81.7  | 86.9 | 76.8   |
| Degree  | 90.3  | 93.6 | 87.4   |
| No certificate                                  | 68.4  | 88.7 | 47.4   |
| Not applicable (no formal education)            | 56.8  | 79.2 | 38.4   |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

Table 5. Labor force by marital status and sex, 2015

| Marital status                 | Total              | Male              | Female            |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Total ('000)                   | 14,518.0<br>100.0% | 8,952.8<br>100.0% | 5,565.1<br>100.0% |
| Never married                  | 4,974.5<br>34.3%   | 3,224.3<br>36.0%  | 1,750.2<br>31.4%  |
| Married                        | 8,976.9<br>61.8%   | 5,550.8<br>62.0%  | 3,426.1<br>61.6%  |
| Widowed                        | 303.8<br>2.1%      | 87.5<br>1.0%      | 216.4<br>3.9%     |
| Divorced/permanently separated | 262.7<br>1.8%      | 90.2<br>1.0%      | 172.5<br>3.1%     |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

Table 6. Number of heads of household by sex, 1970–2010

(Unit: '000 persons)

| Year | Male    | Female |
|------|---------|--------|
| 1970 | 1,721.6 | 423.2  |
| 1980 | 2,059.9 | 444.0  |
| 1991 | 2,884.1 | 653.5  |
| 2000 | 4,114.3 | 663.3  |
| 2010 | 5,350.5 | 990.8  |

Source: Statistics on Women, Family and Community 2016.

### **Average salary in Malaysia**

According to the Wage and Salary Survey 2017, 6 out of 10 salaried workers are males (Department of Statistics 2018). In 2017, the average monthly salary for male worker is RM2,954<sup>2</sup> while the average monthly salary for female worker is RM2,772, with men earning 6.6% higher than women. The salaries for both male and female have increased from RM2,741 and RM2,532 in 2016, respectively. The compounded annual growth rate of the female salary is 9.1% and for male is 7.5%. The average monthly salary for workers with tertiary education is RM4,320 while for individuals without certificate is RM1,410. In general, the civil service in Malaysia does not practise salary discrimination. However, the discrepancy of male and female salary indicates that gender pay gap does exist in the private sector. If the differential in salary or wage affects a girl's choice of occupation, then the elimination of gender pay gap will see more equal participation of both male and female in all industry and occupation in the future.

### **IV. Factors affecting gender pay gap**

The existence of gender pay gap cannot be adequately explained by education. In Malaysia, the number of girls outnumbered boys at the tertiary level. Vaghefi (2018) proposed several reasons that result in gender pay gap in Malaysia. First, girls tend to choose social sciences, education and arts major where jobs are low-paying on average and female dominated. At the same time, they are less likely to be promoted to top management positions. Second, women are more likely than men to be working part-time. Women intending to balance the responsibilities at work and at home find themselves spending fewer hours in the labor market. Women may also opt for jobs that are more flexible and closer to home which are lower in wages and job security as well as lesser training and promotion opportunities. Women may also experience interruption in career that affects their wages in the long term. Third, women are less likely to negotiate their salary compared to men. As a result, they often receive lower wages or salary.

The level of women's involvement in the Malaysian economy has changed gradually according to the country's economic structure. Greater participation of women in the labor market can be a source of inclusive economic growth which spills over to the well-being of Malaysian society. While women in Malaysia enjoys equal opportunity and access to education, they lack behind their male counterpart in economic opportunity.

In May 2018, the ruling party of 61 years in Malaysia suffered a loss to the opposition alliance led by the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Tun Mahathir Mohamad. The formation of the new government saw Malaysia welcoming the first woman deputy prime minister, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. Under her leadership, the Malaysian government is committed to ensuring that women enjoy their basic rights and freedom. The expectation is high on the formulation of the gender equality bill which has been proposed for close to one decade. In the meantime, Malaysia shows increasing commitment in eliminating discrimination against women especially at the workplace.

### **V. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**

The debate on gender equality continues to spark interest across the world including Malaysia. On 5 July 1995, Malaysia acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Convention provides the basis for realizing equality between women and men through ensuring women's equal access to, and equal opportunities in, political and public life, including the right to vote and to stand for election, as well as education, health and employment (United Nations 2019).

The CEDAW provides for equal opportunity at work for females with their male counterparts. In a related development, in the year 2008, the Malaysian government instructed all ministries and government agencies to collect and analyse data according to gender distribution in various sectors inclusive of economics, politics,

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2. On 14 January 2019, 1.0 USD is equivalent to 4.10 Malaysian Ringgit (MYR).

public sector, education, health and family. This is important as the country strives to achieve gender parity as well as to ensure that the society in general will benefit from the nation's development (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2011).

Malaysia successfully presented its Combined Third to Fifth Periodic Reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) during the 69th Session of the CEDAW Committee on 20 February 2018 in Geneva (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2018). The Periodic Reports provided an update on policies, initiatives and concrete measures that are being undertaken by the government of Malaysia to eliminate discrimination against women and to provide space and opportunities for them to thrive with greater achievements in line with the obligations under the CEDAW.

During the constructive dialogue with the Committee in Geneva, Malaysia provided clarifications on the many issues of interest to the Committee members. These include the issues relating to the dual-legal system practices in Malaysia which they viewed as constituting discrimination against women, particularly the rights of Muslim women under the Syariah laws, specific timeframe to lift the remaining reservations to certain articles of the CEDAW, and timeframe to enact the Gender Equality Bill. Some Committee members were also keen to learn of a timeframe to change the patriarchal norms, as well as gender stereotyping, measures to increase number of women in politics and in decision-making positions, alleged cases of discrimination against LGBTI, and accession to relevant international treaties.

The effort to close the gender gap in Malaysia has not advanced at the desired level. Based on the Global Gender Gap Report 2018 published by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Malaysia stands at 101 place out of 149 countries with the index score of 0.676. Within East Asia and the Pacific, Malaysia ranks 13 out of 18 countries. Within the sub-index average, Malaysia has closed the gap between males and females in terms of educational attainment. The health and survival sub-index is 0.974, followed by economic participation and opportunity (0.656), and political empowerment (0.072) (World Economic Forum 2018).

## VI. Policies to close gender gap

The Malaysian government made continuous efforts to increase labor participation of women. This includes effort to increase the representation of women in decision-making positions in the private sector, such as the establishment of a target of 30.0% and the launching of an initiative in July 2017 to publish the names of publicly-listed companies without women on their board of directors. This move is important considering the low representation of women in decision-making positions in the private sector despite their high educational and professional achievements and qualifications, as well as the persistent wage gap in most occupational categories (CEDAW 2018).

The National Women's Policy and Action Plan (2009–2015) of Malaysia outlined efforts to encourage the private sector to implement flexible working arrangements to provide wider opportunities for women to participate in the labor force. A special window is allocated under the Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF) to provide training for women. Career counselling is given at school level to encourage participation of females in non-traditional occupation for females (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2009).

In order to strengthen and maintain women's involvement at work, several initiatives have been taken. This includes campaigns to increase awareness of women's right at work as well as educational program and training for women to address sexual harassment at the workplace. The government established and implemented mechanisms to address discrimination and exploitation cases based on gender at the workplace including reproduction rights, maternity and paternity leaves, equal pay for equal work, and equal retirement age and benefit between males and females (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2009).

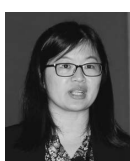
In general, various policies and legislations to encourage women to enter the labor market such as parental leave, provision of childcare, tax system reform, flexible work arrangement and part-time work regulations (Lim 2018) is aimed to further increase female labor force participation as set out in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020).

## VII. Conclusion

Over the years, the government has continued to increase women's access to the labor market, eradicate poverty amongst female-headed households, provide childcare facilities and support for working mothers, and address work and family conflicts as well as sexual harassment in the workplace. In recent decades, the government has aimed to increase the representation of women in politics and decision-making positions (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2003, 15). Various agencies and units were established to spearhead the implementation of various policies and agendas to improve the status of women in social, economic and political realms. This ensures that women's voice can be heard, and gender equality will empower women to achieve social, economic and political development.

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