

Policy Implications for Working Women in Brunei

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to introduce and discuss the policy implications for working women in Brunei Darussalam. Brunei presents itself as an intriguing case for labour policy research from a gender perspective, given its unique economic, socio-political, cultural, and demographic circumstances. Over the past decades women have benefitted from the progressive outlook of the government's gender-intentional development policies and programmes that are related to education, health, and employment. The transformative impact of such policies has resulted in tremendous changes in women's roles and statuses. So much so that women's advancements in the working domain have led to the view that employment opportunities of men are becoming limited.¹ This seeming paradox may have stemmed from relatively high representations of women in the public service and government offices.² To illustrate, about 50.4% of the human resources in the Brunei civil service is made up of women.³ The public sector has a larger number of women in Divisions II, III and IV compared to men.⁴ Furthermore, existing gender gaps⁵ in academic achievements have shown that women are increasingly outperforming men in Brunei. This includes the traditionally male-dominated STEM fields, where the share of female tertiary graduates reached 49% between 2014–2016, surpassing even Singapore and the United States.⁶ Education trends have effects on the composition of the labour force. Yet research has also shown that Bruneian women have historically tend to seek 'lower level, clerical jobs,'⁷ and they are still grossly underrepresented in senior-level civil service positions where only one in five is a woman.⁸

Despite women's achievements in the country, still little is known about their relationship with work, and what areas need further attention from the government in order to encourage women's participation in the labour market, while at the same time enabling them to have a balanced life. Given the general paucity in research on Brunei's labour force situation—and even more so in the area of work-life balance from a gender perspective, this scoping paper attempts to make a modest contribution to current understanding of Brunei in relation to women's work. I discuss extant literature on the subject of labour force participation and its intersections with education and family life, and reflect on key trends from the Brunei Labour Force Surveys. This paper then raises the question of the extent to which existing Bruneian law and policy have enabled women (and to some

1. Yap, Tsue Ing, I. and Roman J. Zytek. "Gender Policies in the Context of Global Transformation of Labour Markets." Presentation at International Conference on Business, Economics and Finance, organised by Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 23 August 2017. <http://ips.ubd.edu.bn/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/seminar-IreneRoman.pdf>.

2. Anecdotal evidence from online discussions based on a blog post by Yunos, Rozan entitled, "The Gender Wars in Brunei" indicates some concerns over gender imbalances at the workplace, where Bruneian women appear to dominate offices and higher educational institutions.

3. Mahmud, Rokiah. 2017.

4. Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam [Public Service Department of Brunei], www.psd.gov.bn.

5. Metussin, Halimaturradiah. 2017.

6. Jamrisko, M. 2017.

7. Low, K. C. Patrick and Zohrah Hj Sulaiman. 2013.

8. EDP (Executive Development Program). 2005.

degree, men) to efficiently reconcile work and family life, and the implications for future policy considerations.

II. Background

Brunei Darussalam is a microstate ensconced within the island of Borneo, located in Southeast Asia. Its smallness in geographical size and population is often eclipsed by its reputation as a wealthy Islamic country governed under an absolute monarchy. Over several generations, Brunei has witnessed a growth spurt largely driven by a thriving oil and gas industry. Revenues from exports of crude oil and natural gas contribute to more than half of the country's GDP.⁹ Brunei has one of the highest levels of GDP per capita in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ On the one hand, Brunei's booming oil industry over the past fifty years has led to widespread socioeconomic and infrastructural developments, and facilitated a tremendously generous welfare system of social protection. Brunei's small population of still less than half a million inhabitants have enjoyed high standards of living. In addition, the country is a tax-free haven, and welfare provisions such as free education, universal healthcare and free medicines, subsidised fuel, interest-free home loans, and study stipends for citizens—have all contributed to the population's relative affluence and general wellbeing.

In recent years however, the country has been plagued with issues linked to negative economic growth¹¹ and rising unemployment. Structural reforms have been under way towards ensuring long-term sustainability and intergenerational equity, increasing productivity and competitiveness, and diversifying sources of growth.¹² As part of the response to declining real GDPs, lower (and lower-for-longer) global oil and gas prices, unscheduled shutdowns that disrupted oil and gas productions, and on-going struggles with diversifying the economy, Brunei has engaged in policy reforms since 2015 aimed at reducing wastages, supporting Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), as well as continuing economic diversification efforts.¹³ Current national strategic policy direction indicates a strong desire to move from a rentier mentality of welfare to 'workfare,' as well as enhancing human capital.

Brunei's labour market issues

The latest statistics on Brunei's labour force participation rate decreased in 2017 to 62.7% compared to 65.6% in 2014, with an employment to population ratio of 56.9%¹⁴ (see Table 1). Table 1 shows the labour force estimates and participation rates from 2007 to 2017. Several issues and challenges of Brunei's labour market have been identified in the literature. This includes problems with structural unemployment, where there is a mismatch between skills and desired employment.¹⁵ Further, both demand and supply sides of the Brunei labour force requires substantial enhancements in terms of industrial expansion, private sector driven growth, improvements in the education system, and a reassessment of restrictive immigration policies.¹⁶ Brunei's labour market situation has seen an upswing in overall unemployment rates, which stood at 9.3% in 2017.¹⁷ According to results of the latest Labour Force Survey the total number of unemployed was 19,200 persons of which 18,200 persons were locals. Among these, youth aged 15 to 24 comprised 8,500 persons, which accounts for an employment rate of 28.9%. In contrast, the total unemployed in the previous survey in 2014 was 14,078 persons. Unemployed persons are characterised "as all those aged 15 and above who are not employed, who carried out activities to seek employment during specified recent period, and who were currently available to

9. Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2018.

10. OECD. 2013. In recent years, Brunei's GDP per capita growth rate has been the lowest in the region owing to the economy's reliance on the oil and gas sectors (which accounted from more than 90% of total exports), *ibid*: 2.

11. Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2015.

12. International Monetary Fund. 2017.

13. *Ibid*.

14. Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2017.

15. Cheong, D. and R. Lawrey. 2009.

16. Razak, Abdul Lutfi. 2012.

17. *Ibid*.

Table 1. Labour force estimates and participation rates (2007–2017)

Year		2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2014 LFS*	2017 LFS*
Total labour force	Total	175,700	178,700	179,600	183,500	185,900	203,651	206,085
	Male	104,400	106,400	106,200	108,500	109,800	115,732	113,789
	Female	71,300	72,300	73,400	75,000	76,100	87,919	92,296
Labour force participation rate	Total	66.7	66.9	66.4	66.6	66.4	65.6	62.7
	Male	76.8	77.1	76.0	76.3	75.7	72.4	68.9
	Female	55.9	56.0	56.2	56.3	56.4	58.3	56.5
Unemployment rate		3.6	3.9	2.6	2.9	1.7	6.9	9.3

Source: Department of Economic Planning and Development, cited in Ministry of Education (2015: 16–17), and Government of Brunei Darussalam (2017).

Notes: 1. LFS denotes Labour Force Survey.

2. There are more males in the total labour force of the country compared to females, mainly due to the large number of contract workers in the construction, development and industrial sectors.

take up employment given a job opportunity.”¹⁸

When disaggregated by sex, male unemployment is higher at 52.1% (or 10,008 persons), compared to females at 47.9% (or 9,191 persons). Unemployed but highly educated graduates are increasingly becoming a source of concern for the government, and a special programme called i-Ready Apprenticeship Scheme was introduced in April 2017, which has reportedly claimed to help secure 146 permanent jobs as of March 2018.¹⁹ Further, the government has been providing support and collaboration to encourage entrepreneurship as well as Third Sector development among youth, as alternative avenues for meaningful work and income generation, through extensive educational and entrepreneurship programmes, public-private partnerships and collaborative efforts.

The concerns over male unemployment rates vis-à-vis female rates have been particularly salient when coupled with the existing gender disparity in academic achievements, which tend to favour females.²⁰ However, due to the limited scope of the present paper, issues concerning men’s lower academic achievements, relatively high unemployment rates, and attendant policy implications will not be discussed in detail. The focus of this paper remains on women for many reasons; one of which is the fact that women have always been in a position of disadvantage due to the multiple burdens they carry in their daily lives; this is fundamentally the gender order of most societies, whether one wishes to admit it or not. Girls are still expected to perform household tasks and domestic chores while growing up, and women are still expected to carry the main function of childcare and caregiving—even if they have a paid ‘day job.’ For Brunei, it was not until 1929, when a limited compulsory attendance rule called the ‘School Attendance Enactment No. 3 of 1929’ was introduced, that boys were favoured over girls’ schooling. Nowadays, attitudes towards schooling and lifelong learning have changed immensely. Furthermore, a higher enrolment ratio for females in tertiary education was evident compared to males, with a difference of 7% between 2001–2002.²¹ According to Metussin (2017: 28), “females tend to far outperform their male counterparts in key subjects, such as Mathematics and English, which are frequently included among admission criteria of colleges and universities in Brunei—and this has resulted in fewer males than females being admitted to colleges and universities.” In 2007, 73% of total graduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam were females, and until today, one can expect to see classes filled with more women than men. Very few have

18. *Ibid.*

19. Hj Abu Bakar, Rasidah. 2019.

20. Metussin, N5, above.

21. ASEAN Secretariat. 2007.

attempted to discuss the potential impact of these gender disparities in detail. A few key exceptions however, have attempted to highlight the associated delays in marriage and family building decisions;²² increasing heterogeneity in attitudes and life course pathways;²³ the intersections between marriage and female labour supply;²⁴ fertility decline, changing preferences for family size, increasing singlehood, and difficulties in finding a spouse given a hypergamous society,²⁵ and applying cultural-fit ways to work-life balance strategies.²⁶

III. Women and work

In contexts of advanced economies, researchers have frequently examined issues concerning the relationship between work and family life. Attention is often focused on addressing the notion that private life—which includes the domestic drudgeries of unpaid work and caregiving; and public life, including paid work/employment, are mutually exclusive. Yet we are increasingly confronted with fast-paced developments in means of travel and communication that have enabled ‘the public’ domain of paid work to encroach into the ‘private.’ As such any discussion on women and their relationship to work must take into account the lived realities of women and their sociocultural contexts.

The promotion of gender-intentional policies and programmes particularly in the area of maternal and reproductive health has had far-reaching results for Bruneian women. Positive health outcomes, coupled with education, act as a gender equaliser that enables women to take advantage of opportunities in the professional domain and level the playing field. Along with changing attitudes towards furthering one’s education and obtaining paid employment, Bruneian women are now actively participating in the labour market and pursuing professional careers, while juggling family life.²⁷ Yet we know so little about the day to day lived experiences of working women in Brunei—and how current policies related to work and family affect them. Understanding obstacles that prevent women from fully participating in paid work can bring about useful policy implications. This is particularly crucial given that in Brunei, a disproportionately higher number of female graduates and degree holders are not reflected in the number of women in executive and decision-making positions:

“Despite the fact that there had been many Bruneian female graduates doing well in all kinds of disciplines and professions, the number of women in decision-making posts in the country do not appear to mirror this trend in higher educational attainments. To illustrate, while 61% of tertiary level graduates were female in 2015, and 62% of government scholarships (including in-service funding) were awarded to women, only 36% of senior managerial positions in the country are held by women. In addition, although more than half or 57% of female workers in Brunei are professionals, the proportion of female-led businesses and institutions are still considered sub-par.”²⁸

The challenge for policy-makers then, is to formulate ways that can ensure equitable opportunities for women, particularly in creating a pipeline of successors who are earmarked and groomed for higher decision-making and executive positions—whether in civil service or the private sector. To this end, the government has so far promoted a few women in more senior positions such as Deputy Ministers, Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Permanent Secretaries of the Brunei Government. Such individuals may be in unique positions but for the vast majority of women in the workforce, it is inspirational and certainly hopeful to see other women rise in leadership positions through their own merits.

To date, there are no written policies that are explicitly geared towards preferential selection of women in such

22. Razak, N16 above.

23. Ahmad, Norainie. 2018a.

24. Anaman, K. A. and Hartinie M. Kassim. 2006.

25. Ahmad, Norainie. 2018b.

26. Low and Sulaiman, N7 above.

27. Ahmad, N25 above.

28. Ahmad, N23 above.

posts (provided they are meritorious);²⁹ but for all intents and purposes, the socio-political and cultural sensitivities of a Malay Islamic Monarchy must be taken into account in further examining the extent to which women in Brunei could scale the upper echelons. However, it is worthy of note to highlight the changes that have occurred.

IV. Vision and policies

Policymakers have long acknowledged the limitations of a rentier economy and the demerits of a burgeoning welfare system. Furthermore, attempts to diversify the country's economy over the past decades have been met with limited success. Thus the formulation of National Development Plans and the Wawasan Brunei 2035 (Brunei Vision 2035) are aimed to develop Brunei's human capital, in terms of creating 1) a well-educated and highly-skilled people as measured by the highest international standards; 2) a quality of life that is among the top ten nations in the world; and 3) a dynamic and sustainable economy with income per capita within the top ten countries globally.³⁰

In terms of economic strategy, the Brunei Vision explicitly aims to encourage equal opportunities for women in the work force and in nation building.³¹ Brunei is ranked 11th in the Global Gender Gap Report 2018 for the region of East Asia and The Pacific, and though it has been performing well in the areas of economy, education, and health, it still scores below average in terms of political empowerment.³² It is challenging to fully understand the underlying sociocultural norms that prevent women from political participation, and to suggest ways to shift such norms in favour of increased political empowerment and engagement is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Brunei has seen an influx in volunteerism and civic engagement in recent years, particularly among youth who are actively engaged with the activities of non-profit organisations. Although not exactly 'political' per se, this may be an area of potential development in the near future.

The Vision further identifies six strategic development thrusts, one of which is to achieve 'High Quality of Life,' that encompasses "self-development, a healthy lifestyle, and access to knowledge and support facilities that fulfil the requirements of achieving social well-being in line with the national development objectives."³³ One identified factor contributing to the achievement of a high quality of life is in the area of inclusive development, whereby women's participation in the workforce is enhanced through the recent changes in the Brunei Laws, related to an extension to the period of maternity leave from 56 days to 105 days. This new Maternity Leave Regulation, which has been implemented since January 2011, was partly introduced to increase the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding practice among working mothers. It has been noted that maternal employment and short maternity leave impede exclusive breastfeeding practice, which disrupts the benefits that would have been gained by an infant. Studies have shown that there has indeed been an increase in the prevalence of exclusive breastfeeding practice after extending paid maternity leave, with the greatest increases seen among working mothers.³⁴ This has been one area in which working women have had an impact on policymaking and vice versa in Brunei, and it is certainly a worthy cause. However, in future, the government might need to look into other forms of family-friendly policy options such as paid paternity leave, or even better, shared parental leave where both husband and wife can share a period of paid leave in order to spend more time with their child (new-born or toddler). The whole idea is to enable families to spend more time together during crucial periods of a child's life. In order to encourage such practices, men also need to be included so that women can continue to pursue their career without the disruptions of having to take time away from work or having to find reliable and trustworthy childcare providers.

Another policy that had recently been introduced to civil servants that has a direct impact on working women is the establishment of the Self-Certified Medical Leave (CSDS), effective 1st September 2016. This policy states

29. Appointments of cabinet members are normally done by decree of His Majesty The Sultan of Brunei.

30. "Wawasan Brunei 2035," www.gov.bn.

31. Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2012.

32. World Economic Forum. 2018. *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*: 43.

33. Government of Brunei Darussalam. 2012.

34. Alhaji, Mohammed M., R. Sharbawi, A. Majeed and N. A. A. Tuah. 2017.

that workers no longer have to present a sick certificate to their superiors or administrators for illnesses that last less than two consecutive days. It allows individuals to simply call in to inform their superiors of their absence from work, and if more days are needed, then only will they require a sick certificate from a registered general practitioner. One of the primary reasons for the introduction of this policy was to thwart any abuse of the medical certificate, and to reduce unnecessary trips to health clinics for illnesses that were considered ‘minor’ and non-life-threatening. For women specifically, the CSDS is beneficial as it covers menstruation pains among a non-exhaustive list of other minor illnesses (along with headache/migraine, back pain, cough and cold, sore throat, indigestion, and even ‘vaginal thrush’). Unfortunately the list of illnesses does not include mental health categories—such as stress from overworking, anxiety or panic attacks, and perhaps even (minor) episodes of depression. Given a recent spike in number of suicides in Brunei, these illnesses may be even more critical than ever as people increasingly confront issues in their private lives that requires off days from work. Further, the CSDS only allows a maximum of six days per year to be drawn out of workers’ total number of annual leave days. This may not be effective for women who in fact experience monthly menstruations—which is twelve times in a year.

While two of these policies mentioned above are related to the health of workers, even more needs to be done in order to cover the wellbeing and even happiness of workers, in relation to ensuring their productivity levels are in check. Other policies that may be worth looking into include:

- Liberalising the labour market to encourage a more substantial and meaningful part-time work. This would encourage women with young children in particular, who may need to stay at home during the day or require a more flexible format of work—including working from home. Of course, this applies to men as well. Note: Part time work is extremely uncommon in Brunei and there is no data available on it.
- Rolling out breastfeeding rooms in the workplace in order to provide a safe, comfortable, and hygienic space for mothers who need to express their milk during working hours. Such spaces are much needed in government buildings—given the fact that there are many women working in the civil service. The introduction of crèche facilities in office buildings where infants and toddlers could be looked after during the working day may also be a viable option for future policy considerations.
- Introducing mandatory paid paternity leave, which is a time designated solely for the father to perform duties of childcare and housework. This should not be taken out of a worker’s annual leave provision—but rather, an entitlement specifically catered for fathers to play a more active role in the household. Such policies can help to lessen the stress and burden of new parents, encourage fathers to get more involved in childcare, and normalise the role of a more involved father in family life. This will also work favourably towards equalising the unbalanced division of labour in the homes of Bruneian families, where women tend to carry the double burden of care and work, and expectations towards women to carry out household tasks and childcaring labour have changed very little.
- Alternatively, parental leave provisions could also be considered, whereby both husband and wife could share a total of between 12 to 24 months of leave from work. The leave could be divided flexibly between the parents up until the child is of a certain age such as when they have settled in at primary school. The purpose of this kind of policy is to promote working mothers to return to work after her maternity leave and not have to rely on paid babysitter or daycare services. It is especially useful for those who do not have the help of grandparents, kin and relatives, to look after their child. Trust towards au pairs and foreign domestic workers could also be an issue for working mothers who are reluctant to leave their child behind when they go to work. In addition, fathers would have a more participatory and involved role in the raising of their child.

V. Conclusion

It makes for compelling argument that with the evident increase in female labour force participation in the country over the decades, there is much impetus for a periodical review and reassessment of extant policies affecting women in the workplace. Statistics show that academically, Bruneian women have increasingly

outperformed men, especially in higher educational attainment. Since labour market composition is affected by educational trends, this area is worth examining further. Be that as it may, one should never fall into the trap of thinking that the task of achieving gender equality in Brunei—whether at home or at work—is even near complete. Part of the lived realities for women everywhere is the burden they carry from expectations of household and familial responsibilities that are still firmly embedded within the social and cultural norms and practices of most societies. These expectations may become barriers to full participation in paid work, or hinder further progress on an individual level—even though progress broadly appears to be in place. As such, a gender perspective is needed when considering policies for further socioeconomic development.

By and large, women in Brunei live a peaceful, stable and secure existence. In general, they have equal access to education and employment as men, and they are treated with respect and dignity. However this is not to say that all women go through the same lived realities throughout their life-course, but in general the shared stories and experiences of living in Brunei are pleasant for women. In the public sphere, women can go out and drive a car on their own; they often go running or exercise without fear of harassment or crime against them; they freely conduct business, entrepreneurship, or humanitarian activism; and in the work realm, women in Brunei are highly visible in offices and public service. It is indeed worth stating that Bruneian women have a voice and are empowered to pursue their interests. It is not enough to discuss facts and figures without considering the lived realities of women on a daily basis. As such, the life goals vis-à-vis career aspirations of women, and what they have to confront with in the real world of work need to be considered, for these discussions to be meaningful and gain traction for policy change. These areas of research warrant further investigation in future.

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