

Reframing Narratives on Women and Development in Malaysia

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Women have long played a pivotal role in Malaysia's development, yet they remain disadvantaged. Their labour force participation has stagnated at around 55%—well below that of men—and they earn less than men on average¹. They remain underrepresented in managerial and leadership positions while overrepresented in precarious, low wage jobs—especially jobs considered “feminine”². This is despite making gains in education to the extent of even surpassing men in higher education achievement³.

These disparities point to entrenched gender norms that have shaped women's economic participation and progress, particularly as women continue to shoulder the brunt of unpaid care work for their families, resulting in many to exit or remain outside of the workforce⁴. Thus, a

¹ DOSM (2024a and 2024b)

² This includes jobs such as nurses, clerks and cleaners (KRI 2018, DOSM 2024a).

³ 42.2% of the female labour force obtained an STPM certificate and above versus 29.7% of men (DOSM 2024a).

⁴ 62.1% of women outside of the labour force cited family responsibilities as the reason for not seeking work, compared 3.9% for men (DOSM 2024a).

critical question is raised: Have Malaysia's policy strategies failed not only in implementation but also in their underlying philosophy?

While Malaysia's policies consistently aim to empower women economically, the framing of women's roles as economic resources for economic growth and neglect of care work redistribution may have inadvertently reinforced the very norms and structures that limit women's advancement. Thus far, the policy philosophy has displayed an instrumentalization of women's labour rather than a holistic view of gender justice, focusing more on integrating women into the economy for economic growth rather than addressing systemic issues. As policies create and reinforce public discourse, they can shape public perceptions and societal norms that influence gender roles, relegating women to subordinate roles in both paid and unpaid sectors, perpetuating the undervaluation of work and skills that are traditionally considered "feminine" or "unproductive" in nature, especially in care work.

The early era of gender-blind development

During Malaysia's early post-independence era up to the 1970s, development strategies were gender-blind and focused on economic growth and modernization, in line with global development approaches⁵. Women were subsumed under family planning programmes, which were an important consideration at the time to slow population growth⁶. Crinis (2004) aptly argues that "women were expected to contribute to nation building by raising levels of modernity and nationalism in their families rather than through participation in the formal workforce". Meanwhile, official discourses ignored women's work in agriculture, especially in the context of family labour, despite official statistics showing that 77% of working women were in the agriculture sector⁷.

In the following decade, the 1970s marked an important turning point in Malaysia's history with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the shift to export-oriented industrialization⁸. The NEP was notable because it marked a regime change from laissez-faire to one of increased state intervention, aimed at eradicating poverty and eliminating racial differences following the racial riots in 1969⁹. Hence, the focus was on racial differentials and less on gender¹⁰. This has been exemplified by the Malaysia Plans that followed the NEP, including the Second and Third, which emphasized the importance of employment and education to combat poverty but made no mention of gender.

Nonetheless, the era saw large numbers of women entering the workforce especially from rural areas¹¹. These newly established industries employed more women than men, coinciding with how both capitalists and the state preferred women for their "small hands" and their "willingness

⁵ Beneria, Berik, and Floro (2016), Rathgeber (1990)

⁶ Crinis (2004), EPU (1965)

⁷ Crinis (2004)

⁸ Kaur and Metcalfe (1999)

⁹ Ariffin, Horton, and Sedlacek (1996)

¹⁰ EPU (1971)

¹¹ Ng, Mohamad, and Tan (2006) and EPU (1991)

to give equal service for less pay”¹². In this regard, industrialization was as much “women-led as export-led”¹³ and many factory women workers made important remittance contributions to their families in their villages¹⁴.

However, the concerns and rights of women were overshadowed by their commodification to attract foreign investment for capitalist gains¹⁵. Women workers continued to be viewed for their sexuality; now not only as mothers but as daughters whose sexuality must be controlled¹⁶. Malay women’s involvement in factory work was not looked upon favourably due to its association with “immorality” and westernism¹⁷, signifying how the social discourse had imposed control upon women. Despite improved educational and economic opportunities, women were relegated to secondary, low-paying jobs¹⁸. The burden of childcare remained solely on working women, and inadequate childcare services forced many to leave the labor force after having children¹⁹.

The Women-in-Development era and its lasting philosophy

The transition to the 1990s was more notable with the launch of the National Policy on Women in 1989, the first-ever ‘Women in Development’ chapter in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991–5), and establishment of the Ministry of Women, Family and Development in 1991 (which later became KPWKM in 2001). The two documents aimed to integrate women in the development process, including in the sharing of resources and opportunities. Importantly, they noted the concentration of women in labour-intensive low-paying jobs, the competing responsibilities of women in family and career, and the role of social norms. They also noted the importance of sharing in family responsibilities and began promoting family-friendly work policies, such as tax exemptions for workplaces which establish childcare centres at the premises or in the nearby area.

Successive five-year Malaysia Plans continued to encourage women’s employment with supporting measures including care provision. The 7th MP (1996 – 2000) institutionalized flexible working arrangements through amendments to the Employment Act. The 8th MP (2001 – 2005) worked towards eliminating gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. The 9th MP (2006 – 2010) built upon the goal of female empowerment in the labour market, including setting out a plan to develop a national target for 30% women in decision-making positions, with supporting measures to increase provision of childcare facilities and promote flexible working arrangements. The 9th MP period was also notable for the introduction of the National Child Policy 2009, which focuses on the objectives of quality, accessibility and affordability of childcare. The 10th MP (2011 – 2015) continued the strong emphasis on women’s labour force participation, this time setting an explicit target. The 11th MP (2016 – 2020) and 12th MP (2021 – 2025) continued this emphasis and approach of addressing care issues to promote

¹² Crinis (2004, 194)

¹³ Ng, Mohamad, and Tan (2006, 106 and 108)

¹⁴ Crinis (2004)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ong (2010)

¹⁸ Jomo K. S. and Tan (1984)

¹⁹ Ariffin, Horton, and Sedlacek (1996)

women's employment, with further initiatives to promote flexible working arrangements targeted at women. The 12th MP is notable for beginning to promote paternity as a measure.

However, despite the wider promotion of the women's agenda and care issues, a few problematic themes have emerged and persisted by the approaches promoted by policies. The prevailing approach can be described as in line with the global Women-in-Development (WID) movement, which was already being widely critiqued by the late 1970s. The WID gained prominence in the early 1970s and is widely criticised for its economistic approach. It perceives women as untapped economic resources to be subsumed for economic development, rather than recognizing women as citizens in their own right, while assuming that women's disadvantages stem primarily from resource constraints and legal barriers, ignoring the power imbalances that women face that restrict their access to resources in the first place²⁰.

Women as resource for economic development and superficial empowerment

A major theme emerging from Malaysia's policy documents is that women are seen as instrumental for the wider goals of economic development through their participation in the labour force. This instrumentalization approach is a cause of concern, for it tends to sideline women's wellbeing or even conflict with it, especially when it comes to ending oppressive gender norms²¹. The approach also risks ignoring the causes of women's subordination, which stem from the power relations that shape the unequal access of economic resource and the gendered division of labour²².

The demonstration of women as an untapped economic resource also arguably marginalizes their existing contributions, whether productive or reproductive. This is exemplified by the 12th MP which states that "Women will be empowered to play a more significant role in society"²³. This quote suggests that women have played not only an insignificant role in the economy, but in society at large, thereby undervaluing their overall labour.

The concept of empowerment is often accompanied with the promoting of women's economic participation, therefore suggesting that women can be empowered through this promotion. However, it appears that women's empowerment is subservient to the notion of contributing to society, in line with the wider instrumentalization approach. In the 11th MP, empowerment is mentioned as part of "empowering communities for a productive and prosperous society"²⁴. In the 12th MP, statements to empower women fall under the banner of "empowering the role of women"²⁵, suggests a favoured empowerment of roles rather than of women themselves. Overall, the use of the concept of empowerment is never preceded with a definition, calling attention to a critique of how the term has been misappropriated and depoliticized in policy as a buzzword²⁶.

²⁰ Miller and Razavi (1995)

²¹ Beneria, Erik, and Floro (2016), Miller and Razavi (1995), Chant and Sweetman (2012).

²² Rowlands (1997)

²³ EPU (2021, 5-37)

²⁴ EPU (2015, 3-24).

²⁵ EPU (2021, 5-37)

²⁶ Batliwala (2010)

True empowerment, as per feminist scholars, requires enabling women to exercise strategic agency over their lives and challenge systemic power imbalances²⁷.

The Malaysia Plans lack specificity on addressing key issues like occupational segregation, wage gaps, and the prevalence of women in precarious, low-paid, or informal work. While some acknowledgment of women turning to informal work appears in earlier plans (only in the 9MP), its purported solution was hardly confrontational as it did not explicitly seek to fundamentally challenge the reasons for women's concentration in informal work. It only proposed (vaguely) to expand social protection but this has been inadequately implemented²⁸. Meanwhile, the promotion of women's entrepreneurship is a recurring strategy to boost labor participation, but it risks replicating the issues of informal work. Efforts to enhance women's representation in decision-making roles, such as the 30% target set in the 9MP for public sector leadership, fail to address the root causes of underrepresentation, such as power dynamics and gender norms. While the identification of the public sector as a platform for change may signal a pathway for change, the lack of integration with private-sector initiatives signals a lack of confrontation. Feminist critiques liken these measures to superficial "add women and stir" approaches that fail to meaningfully challenge existing inequalities or power structures²⁹.

Care work as women's work

In promoting women's economic participation, the Malaysia Plans have consistently considered women's unpaid responsibilities, but their framing suggests that care work is the duty of women alone with the role of men obscured. The terms "men" or "father" are never used nor is there consistently a call for the redistribution of care work, if ever (especially in the current 12th MP). Solutions instead have centred around introducing care services and flexible working arrangements, as is seen in the 9th MP to 10th MP, but interestingly omitted in the 12th MP when promoting women's economic participation.

The only instances where statements may apply to men are when gender-neutral terms like "parent" or "family" are used, but it is far from explicitly calling out men. Given the inherent patriarchal structure of society, such a gender-neutral approach would only serve to perpetuate or leave unchallenged the gendered norms that subordinate women. Only in the 12th MP do we see an explicit call for paternity leave in the private sector, but its suggestion was rather soft given that it is only an encouragement³⁰. Nonetheless, paternity leave was institutionalized later in 2023 with the amendment to the Employment Act.

Conclusion

Malaysia's development policies have evolved from implicitly subsuming women's productive and reproductive roles to explicitly incorporating them as agents of economic growth. However, the prevailing incorporation has been framed largely within an instrumentalist narrative, treating

²⁷ Kabeer (2012), Miller and Razavi (1995)

²⁸ KRI (2021)

²⁹ Beneria, Berik, and Floro (2016, 84)

³⁰ EPU (2021, 5-38)

women's contributions as economic assets primarily for the purposes of economic developing rather than holistically advancing gender justice.

For Malaysia to truly empower women, future policies must embrace a holistic view of gender equality, addressing not only workforce participation but also the structural barriers that limit women's agency. This includes recognizing unpaid care work, challenging occupational segregation, and fostering shared caregiving responsibilities.

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