

# Time to Care: Valuing Women's Labour and Care Work

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## Introduction

Women in Malaysia continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of care work—often without formal recognition nor compensation, sacrificing their social and economic advancement. Some even take on a double shift of caring for their family and earning an income for their families.

As we approach International Women's Day 2025, themed #AccelerateAction, it's imperative to reflect and act upon women's contributions, sacrifices and struggles. It is time that we go beyond mere policy rhetorics and take a clear step in recognising and valuing women's labour, especially in care work.

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This view was prepared by Adam Firouz, Researcher from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). The authors are grateful for the valuable comments from Ilyana Mukhriz.

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## Women's Subordination in the Labour Force

In Malaysia, the policy agenda for women has been especially focused on raising their labour force participation<sup>1</sup>. However, progress has been sluggish, reaching only 56% in 2023—significantly lower than men (82%)<sup>2</sup>. It also places Malaysia behind regional peers like Vietnam (75%) and Thailand (69.1%)<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, women are underrepresented in managerial and leadership positions by about three times less than men, and professional and technical positions by about 1.5 times less<sup>4</sup>. Instead, women are overrepresented in “feminine” and traditional sectors like retail, education, health and social services<sup>5</sup>. Yet even in these women-dominated sectors, they earn less on average than men<sup>6</sup>. Accounting for all factors, a KRI study found that women earned 17.8% less than men for the same type of work between 2010 and 2019<sup>7</sup>.

## The Care Work Conundrum

A primary factor limiting women's advancement in Malaysia is their shouldering of care work. Illustrating its magnitude, 62.1% of women outside the labour force cited housework as the main reason for not seeking employment in 2023, compared with just 4% for men<sup>8</sup>. This percentage of women has long remained around this level since the past decade, illustrating how care has been a longstanding obstacle for women<sup>9</sup>.

Further compounding this issue is the “double shift” or “double burden”. A small-scale survey in 2019 by KRI revealed that women in Malaysia spend more time than men on unpaid care work, while dedicating about the same number of hours on paid work<sup>10</sup>. The types of care work women perform also tend to be more mentally draining and time-sensitive, encompassing tasks such as cooking, cleaning and feeding children.

These indicators on care work present clear implications on women's wellbeing and their ability to participate in the public sphere. However, official statistics continue to not measure and overlook women's contributions to care work, and its important link with Malaysia's wider society and economy. It is estimated that unpaid care work, if accounted for in national GDP, would contribute RM379 billion, surpassing the manufacturing sector in size<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been prominent since the Sixth Malaysia Plan period (1991 – 1995) and by the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2011 – 2015), explicit targets were set, targeting 55% by 2015. Source: KRI (2019)

<sup>2</sup> DOSM (2024a)

<sup>3</sup> Data for 2023. Source: ILO (n.d)

<sup>4</sup> DOSM (2024b)

<sup>5</sup> DOSM (2024a) via Puteri and Hawati (2024)

<sup>6</sup> Puteri and Hawati (2024)

<sup>7</sup> Nithiya, Mohd and Jarud (2023)

<sup>8</sup> DOSM (2024a)

<sup>9</sup> Puteri and Hawati (2024)

<sup>10</sup> KRI (2019)

<sup>11</sup> ISIS Malaysia (2024)

## A Call to Action

The disproportionate shouldering of care work by women highlights the importance of rethinking care policies. After years of underinvestment, initiatives up to date have been inadequate in establishing a robust care ecosystem to support women with career aspirations, with severe shortages in the accessibility of care services that are affordable and reliable<sup>12</sup>.

As a way forward, the government needs to significantly increase its investment in care. Initiatives could include wider subsidies for child-care centres or child allowances to stimulate the care sector; or the government could directly expand government provision by building more care centres—such as those provided by KEMAS but at a much wider scale. Without such fiscal injections, independent care centres would continue to face difficulty in sustaining operations, leading to a tendency to sacrifice quality and breach regulations. This becomes a significant issue when considering that families in Malaysia are very price sensitive and tend to opt for informal services due to affordability—or to take on care responsibilities entirely with mothers dropping out of the labour force<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, by investing in the care sector, aspiring mothers are allowed greater freedom to progress in their careers, furthering their status and their contributions to Malaysia's economy.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that promoting the care sector should not be considered merely as an instrumental step to get women to work, but as a much-needed step of valuing care work in its own right. Hence, women who continue to choose being housewives should also be valued and not be looked down upon or penalised.

In that regard, policy narratives put forward by government—given their ability to shape public perceptions and social norms<sup>14</sup>,—must be cautious to not underplay the existing contributions of women, especially in unpaid care work. Policies also have a role in explicitly calling out the role of men to promote shared familial responsibilities, especially as more women join the labour force—as previous policies have neglected to do so<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Ilyana, Hafiz and Hawati (2024), Hawati and Puteri (2024), KRI (2019)

<sup>13</sup> KRI (2019) and Puteri and Nur Alya (2025)

<sup>14</sup> Adam (2024)

<sup>15</sup> Adam (2024) and KRI (2019)

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