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MOVING TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The past several decades have seen much progress made to enhance the economic participation of women in Malaysia. Since the Declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women back in 1979, there has been a growing recognition that women play a crucial role in the country's economic development. According to official figures, women account for nearly half (48%) of the working-age population (15-64 years), which means that the women's economic contribution can be of significance to the country. In reflecting the government's commitment towards optimising the potential of women in the country's social and economic development, the National Policy for Women (NPW) was formulated in 1989 to ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition of resources, information and access to opportunities and benefits for the development for both men and women. The NPW marked an important milestone for women, as the policy spearheaded the inclusion of a chapter on women in the Sixth Malaysia Plan (6MP). The chapter on 'Women and Development' was significant as it was the first national plan that officially recognised women as a vital economic resource and the key to the country's nation building. The 6MP also sealed the government's commitment to address issues relating to female participation in economic activities and to ensure that future development policies are gender sensitive. Succeeding national development plans (7MP, 8MP and 9MP) also pledged to promote greater female participation in the labour force under the various strategic thrusts.

Amongst the commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and its Platform of Action in 1995 is the pledge to protect the rights of women and remove barriers to equal participation. The Malaysian government seeks to promote gender equality and empower the women of Malaysia in line with the third goal of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Similar commitments were also made in enhancing the empowerment of women in the Putrajaya Declaration, which was adopted at the end of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) ministerial meeting on the advancement of women in 2005. So far, the government has made good on its promise and been consistent in its efforts to improve the status of women in the country. The increased access to education and training has created greater opportunities for women to participate in the labour market.

Still, issues regarding equal job opportunities and wages remain outstanding. Although the overall position of women has improved over the years through increased employment opportunities and better educational attainment, the progress towards equality in the workplace has been slow. While improving favourably from 1970, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women has not shown much improvement since 1990. According to official statistics, the LFPR for women was 45.7 per cent in 2005, which was more or less the same compared with 47.8 per cent in 1990. The LFPR

for women also remained far behind that of men at an estimated 85.2 per cent. Thus, there is a need for an enabling environment to allow women to easily participate in the labour force. In terms of occupational structure, although there has been an increase in percentage of women in professional occupations like dentists, lawyers and accountants, many women are unable to climb out from lower level positions and lower income-paying jobs like clerks, services and sales workers. Furthermore, women often face narrower range of job opportunities with employment heavily concentrated in 'female occupations' like teaching and nursing. The gender empowerment measures from UNDP's 2005 Human Resource Development Report (HDR) reveal that Malaysian women remain largely under-represented at decision-making levels and political participation. As a percentage of total, female legislators, senior officials and managers account for only 23 per cent, while seats in parliament held by women were even lower at 13.1 per cent.

As for wage gap, women in Malaysia are generally drawing much smaller wages than their male counterpart. As observed from the gender-related development index from the same report, the estimated income earned by Malaysian women in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) was only US\$ 6,075 in 2003, while men earned US\$12,869. This means that women are earning less than half (47.2%) of men's income. In fact, the gender wage gap in Malaysia is still relatively large when compared with neighbouring countries like Thailand (61.2%) and Singapore (51.4%) where the take-home pay for women in these countries exceeded more than half of men's income. Hence, this is an area that needs to be addressed, as equal economic participation involves not only the actual numbers of women participating in the labour force but also income earning on an equal basis.

In the study by the World Economic Forum to assess the current size of gender gap among 58 countries, Malaysia was given an overall rank of 40, lagging behind other Asian countries like Japan (38) and even China (33). It is, therefore, of utmost importance that the government takes serious action on these issues and narrow the gender gap. With regards to equality in the workplace, the following recommendations put forward by Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) can be adopted to hasten the progress towards employment equality. They include changing the mindset on the traditional roles of men and women, eliminating discriminatory practices, having in-depth research on low female participation managerial sector and high paid jobs as well as expediting a 30 per cent target of female participation at decision making levels.

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