

Where have all the women gone?

Three decades ago, Lily (not her real name) boarded a London-bound flight to further her studies. At first, she had plans to return home once she graduated. But having gained recognition as an expert in her field, all plans of returning were gone.

Now, she calls the United Kingdom her home. She works in the medical sector there, and Malaysia is the country she visits almost every year to see her mother and siblings.

“It wasn’t my intention to stay in the UK forever. But life happens,” she told Bernama via Zoom.

Lily is one of the 1.86 million Malaysian women living overseas, according to the latest figures by the United Nations. While the figure may not seem overly high, it is roughly equivalent to 12% of Malaysia’s total female population of 15.6 million.

This figure makes Malaysia the country with the second highest regional rate of women migrating out with 57%, second only to Thailand and is above the global average of 48%.

Describing the 57% figure as “huge,” International Labour Organisation consultant Suriani Kempe said it raises questions on what makes more women than men leave and whether this is a worrying trend for the nation.

“Women emigrating out doesn’t mean they’re not coming back, right? But if there are discriminatory policies in place in the country that prevent them from coming back, the government should be concerned,” she said.

Suriani was speaking to Bernama after conducting a workshop organised by the Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development on Inclusive and Gender-Sensitive Reporting on Women Migrant Workers recently.

Although there is no specific research done on the breakdown on why they left, experts agree women are now leaving Malaysia for other reasons as well, such as to advance their career and for better pay.

These issues used to be associated with men. They also agree that many of the women are likely to be educated and professional, choosing to migrate to more developed and wealthier nations.

Where news reports used to feature only Malaysian-born men doing well internationally, there are now many Malaysian-born women featured, such as Florence Tan, chair of the Small Spacecraft Coordination Group at Nasa, and Dr Serena Nik-Zainal, a consultant geneticist and cancer researcher in the UK.

Interspersed among the reasons listed is the issue of gender discrimination, where escaping it may be a major contributor to women’s migration numbers.

Lily said one of the reasons she decided to stay on in the UK was because she did not feel she would be able to succeed much if she had gone back to Malaysia after graduation.

“It was actually like the structure was clearly there (in the UK) and it also felt like a more meritocratic system. Whereas in Malaysia, you never felt, no matter how good you were, you could get anything on merit because too many things were not meritocratically awarded. I often felt women are sidelined,” she said.

Experts point to the low female labour participation rate as a sign of existing gender discrimination.

According to the **Statistics Department**, only 55.3% of women are in the labour force, one of the lowest in South-East Asia, despite women comprising 61% of university graduates in this country.

Unit for Research on Women and Gender (Kanita) member, Prof Noraida Endut at Universiti Sains Malaysia said the trend was a concern, especially if it meant the women were leaving home because they did not have enough opportunities here.

“The women know that if they come back to the equivalent position in Malaysia, opportunities for career advancement may not be as promising. Or there is not enough protection, for a family-friendly work environment in Malaysia compared to the other country,” she said, adding that there needed to be more research on the issue.

She said women and men in the public sector might start off on an equal footing but as the years go by and they start to have families, women’s careers tend to stall compared to the men’s.

“The promotion path is not as clear for women as it is for men. So the frustration may come in from there,” Prof Noraida said.

There is a disconnect between the labour participation rate and the high number of female degree holders, said Farid Basir, vice-president of the Malaysian Employers Federation, who is also the chief people officer at MBSB Bank.

“It demonstrates that it is talent that we have not optimised,” he said, adding that to do so, employers needed to create a structure for women to reach top leadership positions by providing them a developmental platform for mentoring and coaching through targets.

In Malaysia, men make up most of the decision-makers in government, public service and private sectors although women constitute 48.6% of the population.

As of Sept 29, 2021, only 14.9% or 33 out of the 222 seats at the Dewan Rakyat were held by women MPs, while women holding decision-making positions in the public sector accounted for 38.2%.

Women representation in the top 100 public limited companies’ board of directors stood at 25.8%.

For some women, discrimination may not be the reason for leaving. But it is certainly why they have decided to stay away.

According to Talent Corporation Malaysia Bhd, a national agency under the Human Resources Ministry tasked with luring Malaysian professionals back, women make up only 23% of the 5,774 Malaysians who have taken advantage of the Returning Experts Programme from 2011 to 2020.

Some of the incentives offered to Malaysians returning home include tax breaks and permanent residency (PR) status for spouses and children, pending approval by the Immigration Department.

Prof Noraida pointed out that the PR status was not much of a draw, considering children of Malaysian men would be Malaysians and their foreign spouses are eligible to apply for citizenship after a few years.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2022/06/08/where-have-all-the-women-gone>