

Making sure our pandemic recovery works for women

An unequal pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the workforce and, unsurprisingly, women have been hit harder. Data from around the world, including data specifically for Malaysia, clearly indicates this disparity.

Even before the pandemic, Malaysian women have been less represented in the workforce than men.

And although there were small gains seen in 2019 and early 2020, the pandemic has obliterated those gains, experts say.

There are many reasons for this. In 2020, the International Labour Organisation reported that women in Malaysia are highly represented in high risk sectors of manufacturing and services which were – industries that were the worst hit by the pandemic.

Also, as of 2020, women represent 43.7% of the informal sector, where 77% of the total informal sector are own-account holders, according to data from the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**.

And, as schools stayed sealed since the beginning of the pandemic, women have had to bear additional domestic work on top of their professional responsibilities.

According to two recent grassroots research and development programmes, financial instability plagues the low-income groups whose socio-economic situations require dual incomes to sustain the household, says Omna Seeni-Ong, founder and principal consultant of Engender Consultancy, a social enterprise that promotes gender equality and women's empowerment.

"However, structural barriers persist particularly for women who disproportionately experience poverty due to challenges they face in entering the workforce such as juggling care and household responsibilities among other barriers," she highlights.

A blog post titled Care Work In The Time Of Covid-19: Women's Unpaid Care Burden In Four Charts (part of UNDP Malaysia's Kisah series) reports that the pandemic "has exposed many societal shortcomings, especially inequalities, and is likely to increase poverty at a global scale".

One issue flagged was a disproportionate increase in the care-giving burden experienced by women.

The return to normal in the workforce, the writers warned, will be experienced abnormally by many primary caregivers.

"In the long term, how care is distributed within the household has a far-reaching impact on women's economic participation in the world of income-generating activities. A prolonged family crisis will often force women to give up paid employment as they struggle to juggle work and care responsibilities.

“The **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**’s Quarterly Labour Force Statistics for Q1 2020 reinforces this point. We are witnessing the highest number of persons leaving the labour force in recent times. In the same period, most persons leaving the labour force have cited ‘housework/family’ as the primary motivation.

“This could be due to the extra care burden that women in Malaysia have disproportionately incurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, but further research is needed to establish cause and effect,” it says.

Clearly, as the nation rebuilds, we need to establish a new normal where we fix the issues that plagued women pre-pandemic.

There were solutions given in the post: gender-sensitive preparedness and policy responses that not only to reduce the burden on women, but also improve the effectiveness of government interventions; increased public investment in the formal care economy to reduce the burden of unpaid domestic care work such as more social and care workers in the country’s health and social sector. “As we emerge from the pandemic, gender-responsive solutions will need to be mainstreamed in all recovery measures. Without this deliberate approach, the country risks reversing its progress, as well as jeopardising its trajectory towards becoming a high-income nation,” says Omna.

A gender lens

As the country is slowly starting to recover from the devastating impact of the pandemic, it is becoming evident that not every Malaysian has the equal opportunity to get back on their feet.

Women, especially those from vulnerable segments of society – single mothers, women-headed households, victims of domestic violence – are struggling to find work that supports their basic needs.

Tulasi, a single mother of two, was working in housekeeping at a hotel in KL before the pandemic struck. As hotels shut because of the pandemic restrictions, Tulasi lost her job in March 2020.

She learnt to bake from YouTube videos and started selling her products through a friend who had a food stall near where she lived. She also has a part-time job as a packer for an online retailer.

“I go to work from 9am till 6pm and at night, I bake. I only have a small oven so I can only bake about a dozen tarts at one go.

“Often, I bake all night to fulfill my orders but I am grateful that I can earn some extra money this way. Recently, I learnt to bake some cakes from YouTube as well and I will be expanding my menu,” says the 38-year-old.

While she is away at work, her eldest daughter, who is 11, looks after the younger two children, aged nine and seven.

“I worry about them being home by themselves but they have learnt to be independent. I need to show them that I can take care of them and that hard work and perseverance matter,” she says.

Countries have the opportunity to come back stronger and equal, if they address gender gaps now.

With borders now open and life slowly getting back to normal, the outlook for economic recovery is positive.

However, experts both in labour and gender, warn that recovery will also not favour women unless programmes are drawn up using a gender lens.

“When we talk about stimulus packages for recovery, it is not just the amount of package that matters but where the resources are channelled to.

“Defining areas in which public expenditure could help address the gender impacts of the crisis is crucial, such as expanding health coverage and income support, social protection measures and gender sensitive policies,” says International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) Employment Policies and Gender specialist Valeria Esquivelin in a podcast that addresses the uneven recovery from the Covid-19 jobs crisis.

Esquivelin adds that this was crucial because, based on experiences from past crises, the longer women were out of the workforce, the harder it will be for them to go back.

Murray notes that unless gender is incorporated in pandemic recovery strategies, vulnerable groups will struggle to cope.

“So far, there seems to be minimal effort to ensure support for women in recovery.

“Just telling everyone that they can go out to work and children can go back to school will not erase the effects of the pandemic. Things won’t just miraculously go back to what it was before,” says Murray.

“For those in the middle class and above, it helps that things are going back to normal but for the B40, things are challenging.

“If there is any time for gender to be included in policies it is now because we are now seeing that the recovery process is actually having a negative effect on them. We are talking about single mums, survivors of violence, and women-headed households – we aren’t seeing initiatives to help these groups of people,” she adds.

Murray stresses that what the vulnerable need isn’t cash aid but a leg up in finding work to sustain themselves for the long term.

“It isn’t cash aid that they need. The government could look at giving incentives for employers who hire single mums, those who give time off for mums, or provide child care services or allowances to enable these women to go out to work.

“We must make sure that the marketplace isn’t about survival of the fittest; it must be supportive so these marginalised groups don’t lose out just because they have more on their plate,” she stresses.

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Help women, help society

According to the World Bank (2019), removing all economic barriers for women in Malaysia could boost the country's income per capita by 26.2%, translating to an annual income gain of RM9,400 for an individual, says Omna.

"Understanding who is bearing the burden of the crisis and what drives it is crucial for designing policies going forward.

"Post-pandemic, more working women may be forced to make the unenviable sacrifice of giving up paid employment altogether," she says.

"While long-term solutions need to be formulated, some obvious solutions can and must be tackled more immediately, such as providing affordable, if not free, day care services to women so that they can go back to work.

"Grassroots communities have expressed the lack of affordable and accessible essential support services such as elder and childcare, which is a major impediment to women, limiting their work opportunities, forcing them to go for informal precarious employment, having lower productivity... often, there are poor health outcomes for the whole family too," says Omna.

In rural communities in Sarawak, for example, work related challenges faced by men, women and families are mainly balancing a work-life balance, transportation and network accessibility, work-home travel and the lack of childcare facilities, she says.

"There are kindergarten and childcare centres, but most parents cannot afford to send their children to the available centres," she says.

The situation isn't too different in the peninsular.

"We need accessible community-based childcare by expanding Tabika Perpaduan and Tabika Transit Kemas for B40 urban and rural communities in PPR and low cost housing areas.

"The centres must be based on ratio of centre to population. For example, there are only two Tabika Perpaduan in Lembah Subang, a densely populated low cost housing area and only a fraction of the real population of children will benefit," says Omna.

Subsidised childcare is provided by two agencies – Tabika Perpaduan by the Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional for childcare and early childhood education for urban and semi-urban areas and Tabika Transit Kemas (after school childcare) by the Rural Development Ministry which provides early childhood education in rural areas.

There needs to be more of such centres.

Murray says that a more concerted effort by the government is needed.

"At the end of the day, we can go back to work and school but what is being done to help the most vulnerable in society recover.

“Those who have lost out on so much in the past two plus years... if there isn’t some form of help for them to safeguard their basic rights, they may never catch up,” she concludes.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/family/2022/06/03/making-sure-our-pandemic-recovery-works-for-women>