

Time to treat housework as an economic activity

AN amount of RM30mil has been allocated in Budget 2022 for initiatives towards empowering women, and the money will be spent on setting up more childcare facilities in government offices, particularly in hospitals and public universities.

The government has also encouraged businesses in the private sector to offer flexible working hours and provide childcare facilities on their premises.

These initiatives are commendable and will not only receive a big welcome from working women but also, and more importantly, entice more housewives to join the labour force.

For some time now, participation of Malaysian women in the labour market has been lower than in most countries. Based on figures from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for Malaysian women was 55.6% in 2019. In contrast, the rate for developed nations exceeded 60%, with Singapore at 69.1% and Australia at 72.5%.

What are the factors behind this low LFPR for Malaysian women?

The chief factor is women are fulfilling their traditional roles at home. According to the Labour Market Review 2021 (second quarter), 43.5% of Malaysian women stated having to do housework as the reason for not joining the labour force.

It is time for us to re-evaluate the meaning of the term “housework”. Housework refers to activities traditionally considered women’s responsibilities, including preparing meals, cleaning the house, doing the laundry and caring for children. In economics, housework is actually unpaid care work.

In many societies, it is women who do most of the unpaid care work, and gender convergence rarely exists. Women generally focus on household commitments and chores while men provide food and the market income.

However, this complementary division of labour leaves women in a weak bargaining position both in the family and the larger society, as stated by Professor Nancy Folbre, a renowned feminist economist who focuses on the family, non-market work and the economics of care.

Nowadays, however, both men and women have to work to earn money to support the family due to the rising cost of living.

Women’s increased contributions to market income help to boost their family’s living standards but often make it difficult for them to do housework or unpaid care work without sacrificing their leisure time. Many men are reluctant to help out, unfortunately.

Most discussions on the women's labour supply issue define labour entirely in terms of market work, ignoring the opportunity cost of reduced time for unpaid care work.

Most of this work has been excluded from economic analysis because it lies outside the formal and informal market.

Market assumptions treat unpaid care work as an activity that women and men perform only when paid work is not available rather than as an essential balance to market income.

Market-based measures of household income also ignore the potential impact of improved unpaid care work productivity towards enhancing household living standards, improving health and human capabilities, and creating more time for rest and recreation.

In countries with a high level of female employment, policies such as paid family leave, subsidised childcare services and reduced penalties for part-time work can help women and men balance competing demands. Such policies offer social, demographic and economic benefits.

This is the time for us to include unpaid care work in economic analysis, particularly for policy responses and implications.

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