

### **My Say: Diseconomies of misogyny — a redux**

I wrote about this topic in 2017 after reading the rather dated, even then, 2012 World Bank Report on the gender gap in Malaysia. Given Malaysia's income level, the cross-country comparisons showed that the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) was low and it came with significant economic costs.

**Back in 2012, only 46% of Malaysian women of working age were working in either the formal or informal sectors of the economy, or were looking for work. The number has since improved but it is still relatively low. The Department of Statistics Malaysia's March 2021 labour force report showed female LFPR at 55%, compared with 81% for males.**

The other peculiar feature of Malaysia female LFPR is that it declines with age and never rebounds at a later age. Statistics show that the women participation rate in Malaysia is single-peaked, compared with the double-peaked distribution found in most countries. Typically, the participation rate peaks when women are in their twenties and declines slightly as most women get married and have children. But the rate gradually increases again, and peaks when women are in their forties before declining again. In Malaysia, the participation rate peaks when they are in the twenties, and declines thereafter to rates lower than many countries at retirement age.

However, unlike countries with similarly low female LFPR rate, Malaysia's female enrolment in schools is actually the opposite; it is high, exceeding that of males, and female presence and performance in the education system increases towards the tertiary level, where women students and graduates dominate.

In 2019, for example, there were 291,000 male students and 415,000 female students enrolled in public higher education institutions, including polytechnics. The low LFPR is not due to low school enrolment or low educational attainment. There is, in fact, a serious boys and, more generally, male problem in the education system but the labour market numbers show a serious female problem instead. Taken together and looked at from a purely national perspective, we have a serious mismatch — the better performing and qualified gender are not in the labour market.

These numbers have clear economic consequences: wasted resources in educating females but not employing them, and a higher utilisation of less qualified male labour force in the economy. Of course, household incomes can be substantially improved with greater female LFPR, and that translates to higher production and a larger economy.

The 2012 World Bank study also estimated the number of Malaysian women who were "absent" from the labour force then. This is a relative measure in comparison with other

countries. For example, compared with Indonesia, which had a higher female LFPR than Malaysia, there are some 570,000 “missing” Malaysian women. Compared with Singapore, with an even higher participation rate of 62.9%, the number gets larger, to about 1.4 million.

Against a very well-developed and high-income country such as Canada, the “missing” women gets to be as high as 2.3 million. These numbers suggest that Malaysia was operating well below its true potential, and it was estimated that the country’s gender gap resulted in a 23% loss of per capita income, which is a staggering number. I have, however, not seen an update of those figures.

The only explanation for why we do not have a better female LFPR lies outside of economics; on social values and norms that relegate women to an inferior social position despite their educational attainment and economic potential. There is an abundance of misplaced “machismo” that is not backed up with commensurate human capital that lowers household incomes but are in position to decide on women’s roles. There is also an abundance of misogyny dressed up by cultural norms, religious edicts or political ideologies that explains why female LFPR in Malaysia is both low and single-peaked.

Which brings me to why there is a redux of this topic. This has to do with the case of the six Malaysian mothers seeking citizenships for their children who were born overseas. Their efforts have been vigorously opposed by the government via the Attorney General’s Chambers, which filed to strike out their case that “the lawsuit was scandalous, frivolous and vexatious and an abuse of the court process”. This is the reasoning by the Malaysian government against Malaysian mothers seeking citizenship for their children, that it is scandalous and frivolous for these mothers to seek automatic citizenship for their own children.

The six mothers, however, won their case in the High Court where the learned judge opined that “the grievances of the plaintiffs are real and the discrimination is apparent”, and that their children should be granted automatic citizenship, the same treatment had their fathers been Malaysian. But the government appealed the decision and the saga of whether Malaysian women are indeed inferior beings continues. The government’s reason for appealing the decision is beyond my comprehension and, therefore, my ability to respond to it.

At any rate, we have to add “constitutional” reasons for misogyny in Malaysia, in addition to ones based on bigotry of all sorts. Women, as a parent, are really second-class citizens and the government is using the legal system to establish that fact. How is it that the child of a Malaysian father born overseas is a Malaysian and a child of a Malaysian mother under the same circumstances is not? It is only so if women are considered an inferior gender by law, convention and norms. This, despite the fact that it is the mother who actually gave birth to the child!

Luckily, the right to vote is not subject to the same restrictions as the right to have your child be Malaysian, and I would really like to see gender become more prominent on the political agenda than what it is today. This is the only remedy to the appalling situation we are in today.

It also makes a lot of economic sense, and I truly believe Malaysians are better than how people in positions of power are behaving. The economic dividends of less misogyny are substantial as projected in the report cited earlier, in my estimation, more so than the much-hyped, jargon-laden vacuous initiatives mentioned in the 12th Malaysia Plan such as IR4.0, ESG and big data.

There needs to be an empowered women's movement, especially among the young, to change not just the laws of the country but also social norms and perceptions. There are far more cross-cutting gender issues than race-based ones. We have been in a race-based political environment for far too long. It has not resulted in a more united society, nor has it yielded much economic dividends. For one, it has not addressed the problem of misogyny and gender inequality.

While women make up slightly more than half the population and registered voters, only about 14% of the candidates who stood for election in the last general election were women, and the results showed that only about 11% of the elected representatives were women. The Pakatan Harapan government that won the 2018 general election, however, made some headway on this agenda in terms of women's representation in Cabinet and in key appointments, including Malaysia's first deputy prime minister and chief justice.

The situation has since deteriorated, despite the proliferation of political appointments that accompanied the changes in governments as these appointments pandered to elected representatives, the large majority of whom are also men. One can also assume that the quality of these appointees has not improved as they were drawn from the same talent pool. As of 2019, Malaysia ranked No 143 out of 190 countries on women's representation in national parliament according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union. In Asean, Malaysia stands just above Myanmar and Brunei, an embarrassing position to be in.

If acknowledgement is the start to solving a problem, then we have to acknowledge that we do have a problem of gender. But this inequity has to be first seen as a problem and that requires not just advocacy but activism that mobilises and translates votes into representation that reflects these concerns.

Given the mess we are in on many fronts, putting more women in positions of decision-making cannot be any worse. To start with, women form the larger group of better-educated Malaysians despite their inferior status as parents.

And as a model, the world recently saw the departure of Angela Merkel as chancellor of Germany after 16 years of holding that position. She is widely acknowledged as not just competent and level-headed but free of scandals that typically afflict other (male) leaders. She is an extraordinary ordinary leader indeed.

***Dr Nungsari A Radhi is an economist***

<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/my-say-diseconomies-misogyny-%E2%80%94redux>