

More female graduates, but less female workers

THE times are changing. More and more women are enrolling in higher educational institutions and have outnumbered men.

In the late 1950s when Malaya first gained its independence, women only made up 10.7% of the total undergraduate population at Universiti Malaya (UM).

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Now, women make up more (62%) than the men undergraduate population.

A Statista report in 2022 indicated that there were 358,600 female students against 234,080 male students enrolled in Malaysia's public higher institutions in 2020.

The number of males attending universities has also been decreasing since 2016, but this is not just a local trend.

In the US, there are six female university students for every four male students which is the largest female-male gender gap in the history of higher education.

Gender stereotypes: Women are Studious

One of the reasons why there is a huge gender gap in higher learning institutions in Malaysia was because Malaysian girls have been known to perform better in secondary school.

A Unicef report also revealed that female students have outperformed their male counterparts in four key subjects which are English, Mathematics, Science and Bahasa Malaysia as well as reading.

Compared to boys, girls also perform better when it comes to staying in school and are less likely to drop out.

On the other hand, boys are more likely to be drawn into unhealthy gender stereotypes which inhibits them from fully partaking in academic life and enrol in universities.

A study conducted by the Penang Institute revealed that there are more negative stereotypes in boys than girls when asked in a Malaysian context.

"Participants felt somewhat strongly in agreement with statements such as 'boys have to hide their fears, 'girls are ambitious', 'girls have a clear vision of the future compared to boys', 'girls are more disciplined' and 'girls are hardworking'.

"These answers indicate that girls benefit from positive stereotypes which encourage them to go to university, while conversely boys are given negative stereotypes; implying that masculine attributes include being undisciplined, lazy, lacking in ambition and without vision," the report says.

Therefore, boys have a hard time trying to join activities which are important to flourish in higher education as reading and writing are perceived as feminine pastimes.

Higher Graduates but Lower Workforce Participation

Despite more women participating in universities and being more likely to graduate compared to men, they are still underrepresented in the labour force.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM)**, female graduates make up more than half of the unemployment rate (54.2%) compared to males (45.8%).

The majority of unemployed females had to adhere to housework or family responsibilities (35.3%) followed by attending training or school programmes (32.3%) and the rest were going to further their studies (4.9%). “Looking at gender distribution of employed graduates in 2021, the share of females was higher at 51.9% or 2.37 million persons while males comprised 48.1% (2.2 million persons).

“Compared to the previous year, the number of female employed graduates experienced a higher annual growth of 7.4% in 2021 as opposed to an increase of 2.5% in the number of male employed graduates,” DoSM said in a report.

According to United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA), Malaysia Country Office programme analyst Tengku Aira Tengku Razif, the gender wage gap, motherhood penalty and leader gender stereotypes are a few reasons behind women’s difficulty in reaching executive-level positions.

“Companies can begin by ensuring that male and female employees receive the equitable parental leave.

“This is essential for building a family foundation of shared care labour duties — which goes a long way in keeping women in the workforce,” she told The Malaysian Reserve (TMR) Tengku Aira suggested that

companies should designate a workplace crèche for working parents to leave their children so they can have a healthy balance of work and childcare.

Moreover, employers will also need to stand up to end the Gender Pay Gap in their organisations which will attract more female employees and encourage them to seek promotions since they are guaranteed equal pay for equal work.

“The Gendered Workforce is another challenge through which women remain disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, while men dominate the high- est-paying fields,” she added.

Another key issue which hinders women’s Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) and Malaysian women is raising awareness of unwanted and unacceptable behaviour that creates another barrier to a workplace’s success.

Since women tend to have lesser pay than their male counterparts, they would suffer from retirement the most.

Addressing the Challenges

In 2016, the World Economic Forum revealed that women in top positions are still a small number.

There were only 37% at the managerial level, VP level (29%) and C-suite level (19%).

However, the percentage of female leaders is slowly rising. A 2022 report by Grant Thornton showed that the proportion of leadership roles held by females worldwide stood at 19% in 2004, the number rose to 31% in 2021 and 32% in 2022.

In the Asia-Pacific region, 30% of leadership roles are held by women, while 37% of such roles are held by women in Asean nations.

Unfortunately, women are still underrepresented at every level of the corporate hierarchy where the gap is more prevalent at senior levels.

A diverse workplace creates an inclusive culture and environment that creates solutions which can solve complex problems, raise employee productivity and bring job satisfaction.

The upcoming 15th General Election (15GE) would mean a change in government, which also means a change in policies.

Therefore, the Women's Aid Organisation (WAO) has formed a GE15 manifesto to make female workers safer and encourage diversity in the workforce.

"The recent amendments to the Employment Act 1955 prohibits the termination of female employees who are pregnant or suffering from illness arising out of their pregnancy.

"However, this does not extend protection against discrimination for job-seekers to prevent discrimination against pregnant (and potentially pregnant) women looking for jobs," it said in the manifesto.

WAO also hoped that the new government would include policies that ensure more women in leadership positions, equal pay, equitable access to employment opportunities, family-supportive workplaces, and zero tolerance for all forms of discrimination and harassment.

All these policies should also comprise the whole employment cycle from recruitment, retention to resignation or retirement.

"According to the World Bank, Malaysia's income per capita could increase by 26.2% if all economic barriers are removed for women. Ensuring gender equality in the workplace benefits all strata of society in the long run."

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