

Malaysian Women in Workforce: Charting a Path to Inclusive Employment



This policy brief presents the key findings of our research project and offers policy recommendations based on a quantitative study involving 400 Malaysian women from different backgrounds with university degrees. The research explored various aspects, including university subject choices, job-seeking behaviour, challenges in the job market, and other social factors influencing women's employment experiences.

Background of Malaysia's Female Labour Force Participation

Ensuring equal representation of women in the labour force charts a path for advancing gender equality.¹ To formulate effective policies that boost women's labour force participation, a comprehensive understanding of their experiences in pursuing employment within the Malaysian context is essential.

In 2023, Malaysia's female labour force participation rate stood at 55.8%, a 12% increase from 2001², yet still trailing behind the male participation rate of 81.9%.³ Malaysia's female labour force participation follows a distinctive "single peak" pattern, with women less likely to re-enter the workforce after reaching a certain point. Various socio-economic factors contribute to women's presence in Malaysia's labour force. This includes:

Age

Education level

Marital status

Locality

Family situation

Cultural influences

¹ International Labour Organization, "Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM)," https://www.ilo.org/Wcmsp5/Groups/Public/---Dgreports/---Stat/Documents/Publication/Wcms_422090.Pdf, 2015.

² Nor Aznin Abu Bakar and Norehan Abdullah, "Labour Force Participation of Women in Malaysia," *Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial*, September 9, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.32890/jps.13.2010.11341>. ; Khazanah Research Institute, "Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey" (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute, 2019).

³ Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2023," 2023.

Negative Correlation with Marital Status and Discriminatory Hiring Biases

Several existing literature has consistently observed a **negative correlation between FLFP marital status**, resulting from women's departure from the workforce upon marriage.⁴

- Salleh and Mansor estimated that married Malaysian women are 29.7% more likely to exit the labour force as compared to their single counterparts.⁵

Meanwhile **discriminatory biases and preferential hiring of men** are another obstacle to women's labour force accessibility.

- In 2021, women constituted 53.2% of STEM graduates from local tertiary institutions, yet the hiring rates for male graduates remained disproportionately higher.⁶
- A recent survey has also revealed that 41.3% of 761 respondents expressed the belief that an extended maternity leave would reduce women's employability.⁷

Key Findings

Family and cultural influences strongly shape the career trajectories of Malaysian women.

Our analysis highlights the dual role of family in women's careers—serving as both a crucial source of support and a significant challenge. **Respondents who identified family as their primary support in pursuing career goals also acknowledged that family responsibilities were a key factor causing delays in their professional advancement.**

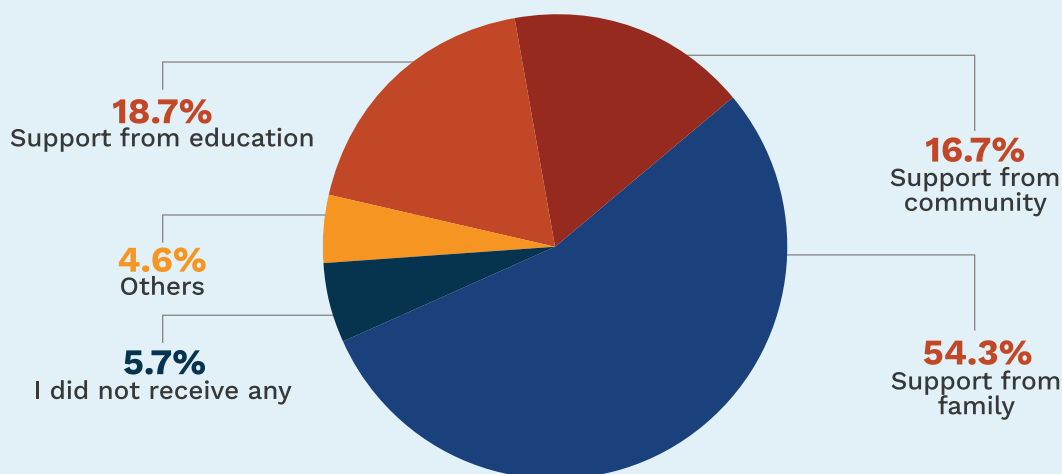


Figure 1. Respondents' Sources of Support When Pursuing Their Career Goals

⁴ Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)* 7, no. 7 (July 28, 2022): e001641, <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i7.1641>.

⁵ Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia,".

⁶ Rachel Gong, (Malaysia's Gender Gap in Stem Education and Employment, 2023).

⁷ Bernama, "The Economy Is Back on Track but Women's Presence in Workforce Is Not," *Bernama*, August 7, 2022, .

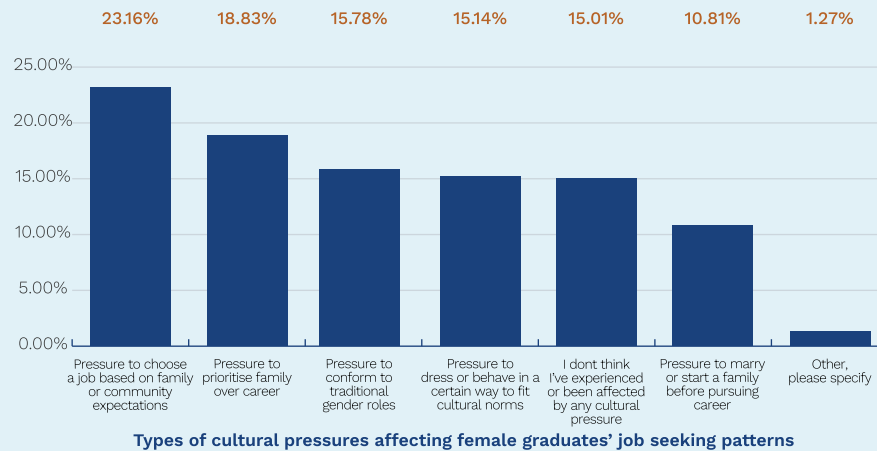


Figure 2. Types of Cultural Pressures Encountered by Respondents In Their Job Search

The predominant cultural pressures encountered by women in our survey during job searches include the expectation to choose a job based on family or community norms, the emphasis on prioritising family over career, and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. This finding is consistent across ethnic groups, although the specific pressure may vary.

Our study underscores the universal importance of work-life balance for women across various age groups, with the notable exception of those aged 46 years and above during their job searches. This finding highlights women's desire to balance their professional and personal lives, which includes family responsibilities.

Horizontal gender segregation persists in Malaysia's educational and employment landscape.

Our research highlights a notable trend wherein women predominantly occupy non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in both the university and in the employment sector. Despite policies to enhance women's representation in STEM since the 1980s, the disparity persists.⁸

Our study found a significant mismatch between the academic backgrounds of women and their initial employment, notably an overrepresentation of women with non-business and sales backgrounds in the sector. Conversely, a notable number of women with science degrees exit the field upon entering the job market, indicating the presence of the leaky pipeline phenomenon.⁹

⁸ Siew Ching Goy et al., "Swimming against the Tide in STEM Education and Gender Equality: A Problem of Recruitment or Retention in Malaysia," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 11 (January 30, 2017): 1793–1809, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1277383>.

⁹ The leaky pipeline metaphor captures the consistent loss of women in the Science and Technology field from elementary school through the tertiary level and into the workforce. # Despite excelling in their studies, capable girls tend to opt for non-STEM subjects when planning their academic and professional endeavours.

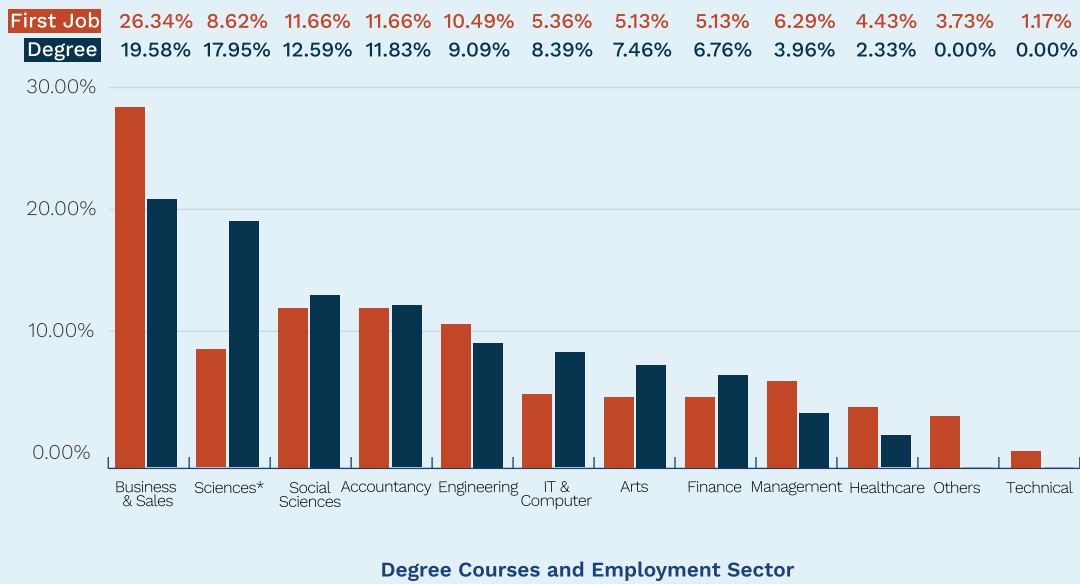


Figure 3. Comparison Between Respondents' Degrees and their Employment Sectors

This could be explained by the challenging STEM labour market as predominantly male and the persistent gender wage gap in the field. Among the respondents in the field, **more than half agreed that they experience challenges such as employees' biases towards men.**

The compounding influence of job mismatch and ethnicity on women's transition from labour to employment.

Three factors influence women's career delays – lack of job opportunities in desired fields, lack of necessary skills or qualifications and cultural expectations or pressures. The lack of job opportunities in the desired field aligns with our finding of the mismatch between the degree obtained and the actual job role since the lack of job opportunities in the desired field might lead graduates to change their field.

Female engineering graduates demonstrate a significantly higher employment rate compared to their counterparts in Science*. Concurrently, individuals with a non-STEM background secure employment faster than those holding a Science degree. **This disparity in hiring rates underscores the enduring issue of job mismatch in Malaysia, affecting 42% of all jobseekers, as reported by Bernama.**¹⁰

The job employment timeline is notably influenced by ethnicity, showing significant variations among different ethnic groups. While ethnicity is not the central focus of the study, its relevance emerges due to the inherent nature of the Malaysian context. Chinese female graduates stand out, with a majority finding employment within six months, while Indians show the highest percentage for those securing a job after more than six months.

This dual burden places women at a distinct disadvantage, as they navigate a landscape where both gender and ethnicity contribute to systemic barriers and gender biases.

¹⁰ Tilo, "Government 'Working on Aligning' Skills Mismatch in Malaysia."

Recommendations

Policy Issue	Type	Target Demographic	Policy Framework	Recommendation
Mainstreaming Family in Policies	Legislation	Parents	Employment Act 1955 - Section 37 & Section 60F	<p>Enhancing parental leave policies by extending maternity and paternity leave, with a particular emphasis on making paternity leave mandatory.</p> <p>A long term expansion of both maternity and paternity leave is necessary, with an increase to 4 months for mothers, and 1 month for fathers. This is to ensure flexibility for new parents and investment in collective social welfare.</p>
	Legislation	Employers	Federal Constitution - Article 8(2) Employment Act 1955 - Section 37(4)	<p>Implementation of stricter measures to enhance the anti-discrimination law's effectiveness.</p> <p>Increasing the current anti-discrimination fine from RM50,000 for employers, coupled with tax incentives can ensure that all businesses comply with the existing acts allowing for equal hiring and treatment of employees taking parental leave.</p>
	Initiative	Women	Career Comeback Program - Talent Corporation Malaysia	<p>Establishing the Women's Career Comeback Program as a permanent initiative</p> <p>The ongoing tax exemptions, employment aid, workshops and training provided to women has proven successful in effectively helping working mothers reintegrate in the workforce. It should therefore be maintained as a permanent policy. .</p>
	Legislation	Employers	Employment Act 1955	<p>Revising the Employment Act 1955 for a more robust and effective framework for implementing flexible work arrangements (FWA)</p> <p>It is important to implement clear provisions for flexible work hours, and policies that outlaw any rejection of requests for flexible work on the basis of family or care responsibilities.</p>
	Policy	Ministry of Education	Education Act 1996	<p>Making childcare a public good to ensure equitable provision</p> <p>Considering childcare as a public good akin to public schools can ensure that it does not vary depending on the workplace or that it only caters to certain groups. Public investments in childcare facilities and centres can ensure that all families have equal access.</p>
	Policy	Elderly Citizens	National Ageing Blueprint	<p>Accelerating the formulation of a comprehensive National Ageing Blueprint</p> <p>To ease the care burden on women, and address Malaysia's ageing population, creation of a national ageing blueprint should take place. Establishing initiatives such as caregiver support, centralised information on caregiving, and financial aid for caregiving.</p>

Policy Issue	Type	Target Demographic	Policy Framework	Recommendation
Equalization of Women Across Sectors	Policy	Women	National Policy for Science, Technology and Innovation (NPSTI)	<p>Enhancing the National Policy for Science, Technology and Innovation 2021 - 2030 with a more specific and detailed strategy for augmenting the participation of women in STEM fields.</p> <p>Improvements can be made to the NPSTI to account for the leaky pipeline phenomenon occurring in STEM fields. Through organisation of educational initiatives and awareness programs in schools, coupled with diversity training and seminars in the workplace.</p>
	Initiative	National Ministries	Gender Focal Points (GFP)	<p>Empowering Existing Gender Focal Points and Gender Focal Teams across all public and private institutions</p> <p>Creating a gender sensitivity curriculum led by Gender Focal Points (GFP) for the private sector to provide gender training and development and to encourage organisations to adopt the same activities as conducted in the public sector. .</p>
	Legislation	Employers	Data Protection Act - Section (5)(7)(8)	<p>Incorporating within the Data Protection Act 2010 a legal mandate for pay transparency, alongside the prohibition of employers from requesting information regarding pregnancy and marital status</p> <p>To effectively tackle the wage gap, and discriminatory hiring of men over women, a legal mandate regarding pay transparency and employee data protection must be enforced. Ensuring complete pay disclosure by employers and outlawing requests of personal information such as marital status.</p>
	Legislation	National Ministries	Gender Equality Bill	<p>Instituting the Gender Equality Bill</p> <p>Development of the Gender Equality Bill can take place to pave the way for a holistic and integrated approach to tackling gender discrimination in all institutions in Malaysia.</p>

Figure 4 : Policy Recommendations

Conclusion

As we conclude, we hope that our research findings will serve as a guiding compass in the formulation of progressive and equitable policies. Our aspiration is that the findings from our report and recommendations presented in this policy brief will not only inform decision-makers but also inspire tangible actions that empower women in Malaysia.

