

## **Women Labour Force in Malaysia: Why is There an Increased?**

*Tenaga Kerja Wanita di Malaysia: Kenapa ia Semakin Meningkat?*

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### **Abstract**

There have been some changes in the distribution of women's employment in Malaysia. Women account for about 40.0 percent of all employed workers. They have found their labour in high demand at a time when it is becoming increasingly acceptable for them to participate in paid employment. They are involved in various types of job in different type of industries. The number of women in employment in certain industries has risen in 2000. Why is the number of women in the labour force increased? This question is the central concerned of this paper. This paper tries to compare the detailed occupational structure of the Malaysian women labour force. A sampled survey was used to get primary data. The data used in this research was taken from a bigger research that had been carried out. In-depth interview was used to obtain the required data and information. The increasing importance of women in the labour force has resulted in a number of studies by demographers, sociologists, and economists, of the pattern of current trends in women's labour force participation in Malaysia. There are four factors influencing changes in employment structure; first the changing structure of the economy, second the level of formal education received, third the attitude of the society and the last one the division of domestic labour. This paper has looked at the detailed occupational structure of the Malaysia labour force. It has examined policy changes instituted by the government, that is, from import substitution industrialisation to an adoption of export promotion strategy based upon foreign direct investment for continued growth rates.

### **Keywords**

Women labour force, employment structure, economic

### **Abstrak**

*Terdapat beberapa perubahan dalam taburan pekerjaan wanita di Malaysia. Kira-kira 40 peratus daripada jumlah pekerja yang terlibat dalam sektor pekerjaan adalah wanita. Mereka telah menemui tenaga pekerja dalam permintaan yang tinggi pada satu masa apabila ia menjadi semakin diterima untuk mengambil bahagian dalam pekerjaan yang dibayar. Mereka terlibat dalam pelbagai jenis pekerjaan dalam sektor industri. Bilangan wanita yang bekerja dalam industri tertentu telah meningkat sejak tahun 2000. Mengapa bilangan wanita dalam tenaga*

*buruh meningkat? Soalan ini menjadi perkara pokok dalam artikel ini. Artikel ini memaparkan struktur pekerjaan yang terperinci daripada tenaga kerja wanita di Malaysia. Satu tinjauan sampel telah digunakan untuk mendapatkan data primer. Data yang digunakan dalam kajian ini diambil dari kajian yang lebih besar yang telah dijalankan. Kaedah temu bual mendalam telah dilakukan untuk mendapatkan data dan maklumat yang diperlukan. Kepentingan peningkatan wanita dalam tenaga buruh telah menyebabkan beberapa kajian dibuat oleh ahli demografi, ahli sosiologi, dan ahli ekonomi, satu corak trend semasa dalam penyertaan tenaga kerja wanita di Malaysia. Terdapat empat faktor yang mempengaruhi perubahan dalam struktur pekerjaan; pertama perubahan struktur ekonomi, kedua peringkat pendidikan formal yang diterima, ketiga sikap masyarakat dan yang terakhir pembahagian tenaga pekerja domestik. Artikel ini telah melihat struktur pekerjaan yang terperinci daripada tenaga kerja di Malaysia. Ia telah diperiksa sejak perubahan dasar yang dimulakan oleh kerajaan, iaitu dari penggantian import perindustrian kepada penggunaan strategi eksport-promosi berdasarkan pelaburan langsung asing bagi kadar pertumbuhan yang berterusan.*

### **Kata kunci**

*Tenaga buruh wanita, struktur pekerjaan, ekonomi*

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## **Introduction**

There have been some changes in the distribution of women's employment in Malaysia. Women account for about 40.0 percent of all employed workers. They have found their labour in high demand at a time when it is becoming increasingly acceptable for them to participate in paid employment. They are involved in various types of job in different type of industries. The number of women in employment in certain industries has risen in 2000. Why is the number of women in the labour force increased? This question is the central concerned of this paper. This paper tries to compare the detailed occupational structure of the Malaysian women labour force. Direct comparisons are possible using data from the Population and Housing Census published by the Department of Statistics for the year 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000. Population censuses are the only source of data covering a long time span enough to allow the measurement of change in women's employment. Although statistics for 1947 and 1957 could in principle be similarly analysed, the statistics are not entirely comparable.

## **Methodology**

Macro and micro studies are used to obtain data. At the macro level, library research was carried out. Secondary data are collected from the General Report of the Population Census for the year 1970, 1980, 1991 and 2000 and the Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001-2005. A sampled survey was used to get primary data. The data used in this research

was taken from a bigger research that had been carried out. The purposive sampling for unit of 12 families is chosen from families that have three generations whether they are in the nucleus or extended family unit. The second generation was set as the main sample according to the highest level of education received. The respondents are chosen using snowball technique. In-depth interview was used to obtain the required data and information. The discussion in this paper is presented in two sections. First section reviews the trends in women labour force participation using secondary data. Focus will be on four aspects, that is women participation by age-group, level of education received, major industrial sectors, and by different occupational groups. Section 2 discusses the factors which influences the changes in the pattern of women labour force participation to occur using secondary and primary data.

### **Trend in labour force participation**

The increasing importance of women in the labour force has resulted in a number of studies by demographers, sociologists, and economists, of the pattern of current trends in women’s labour force participation in Malaysia. Trends in women’s labour force participation are reviewed with a view to establishing the likely consequences for trends in occupational segregation. Economic activity rates presented in Table 1 show the proportion of women and men in the labour force. The labour force proportion of men has always been high and remained steady at around 80.4 percent in 2000. The work rates for women were also fairly stable, at about 42.1 percent in 2000.

**Table 1** Labour force participation rates, Malaysia

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
1970	60.2	38.9	81.6
1980	63.3	42.2	84.4
1991	62.9	41.9	83.8
2000	na	42.1	80.4

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980, 1991 (a) & 2000

### **Women participation by age-group**

Women participation in the labour force for the age group 15-19 years in 2000 is high as compared to 1970. This scenerio shows that the working age had started at an early age. The percentage of those involved in the labour force beyond the retirement age, that is after the age of 55 years old had also increased (Table 2). The participation pattern among women is influenced by the women’s life cycle. Women enter the labour force at a younger age, which is at 15-19 years, giving 34.6 percent in 1970. Their participation rate increase at its highest in the age group of 20-24 years and start to decrease in the age group of 25-29 years but increase again in the age group of 30-34 and decline again in the age group of 50-54 years. The situation is different for 2000, whereby the

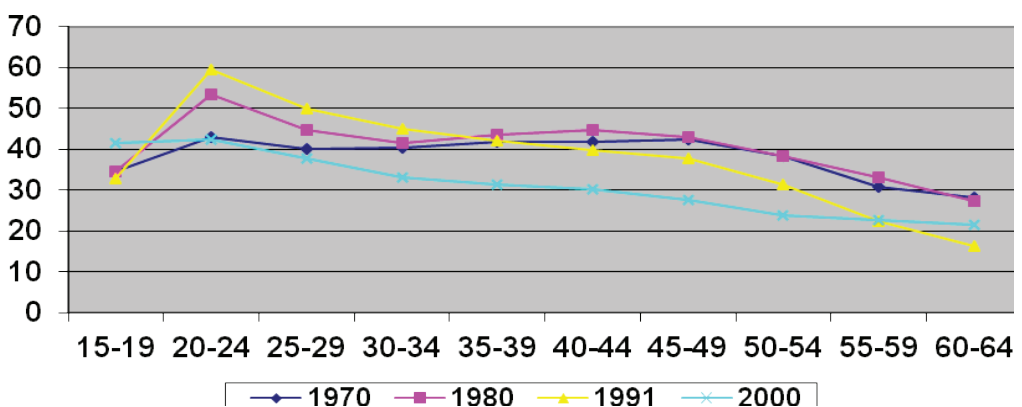
participation rate increases at its highest in the age group of 20-24 years, an average of 42.5 percent. Work rates dropped again to 37.9 percent in the age group of 25-29 years and continued to decrease until the age of retirement.

**Table 2** Women labour force participation rate by age group, Malaysia

Age group	1970	1980	1991
15-19	34.6	34.6	32.9
20-24	43.1	53.5	59.6
25-29	40	44.7	50.1
30-34	40.5	41.5	45.1
35-39	41.8	43.7	42.2
40-44	41.9	44.8	39.7
45-49	42.5	42.9	37.7
50-54	38.4	38.3	31.5
55-59	30.9	33.1	22.4
60-64	28.1	27.2	16.3

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980 & 1991 (a)

Participation of women in the labour force shows an interesting picture. This change has been termed the 'one-phase' working life, or the uni-modal pattern of female employment. In 1970 we see the emergence of the bi-modal pattern. After a drop in the economic activity rate for the 25-29 age-groups, there is an increase in the rate of women participation age 35-39 years. The age group in which peak work rates occur also had changed from 20-24 years and 45-49 years in 1970 to only 20-24 years in 2000 (Figure 1). In 2000, changes can be seen when the participation rate of women by age group shows similar to that of a uni-modal curve. The emergence of the uni-modal work curve pattern means that characteristics of the typical working women have changed substantially over the years.



**Figure 1** Women labour force participation rate by age group, Malaysia

### Women Participation by Level of Education

Changes can also be seen in the level of education received among the labour force. Table 3 shows that the total rate of labour force that do not go to school had decreased from 43.0 percent in 1970 to 8.0 percent in 2000. This shows that the level of education received had increased.

**Table 3** Percentage distribution of total population by school attendance and gender, Malaysia

Year	Never attended school	Attended school	%	Total number (000)
2000	08	92	100	22,198.3
1991	16	84	100	14,705.3
1980	23	77	100	10,932.6
1970	43	57	100	10,319.3
Male				
2000	06	94	100	11,262.1
1991	12	88	100	7,390.4
1980	16	84	100	5,441.8
1970	36	64	100	5,198.4
Female				
2000	10	90	100	10,936.1
1991	20	80	100	7,314.9
1980	29	71	100	5,490.8
1970	51	49	100	5,120.9

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980, 1991 (a) & 2000

Note: \* include pre-school

We cannot deny the fact that education opportunity for women had increased. This can be seen from the participation rate which is almost the same for female and male students at the primary and secondary level. Total enrollment for these two level of education is about half of the total enrollment. Female students at the upper secondary level are about 49.1 percent of the total enrollment in 2000. The intake of female students at university level is about 47.3 percent of the total intake for 2000. The intake of female students are increasing in the fields such as medical, dentistry, engineering, architecture and accounting (Malaysia 1991 (b)). However, in terms of discipline chosen by the students, there still exist differences by gender whereby female students are keener to choose art stream. An interesting picture to be noted is that the number of female students in the technical stream had increased from 4.3 percent in 1970 to 29.4 percent in 2000 (Table 4).

**Table 4** Percentage of female students by educational level and stream

	1970	1980	1990	2000
<u>Educational Level</u>				
Primary	46.8	48.6	48.6	48.9
Secondary	40.6	47.6	50.5	45.9
Upper Secondary	42.6	45.5	59.3	49.1
University	29.1	35.5	44.3	47.3
<u>College</u>				
Polytechnic	13.2	21.5	25.2	na
Teacher Training Institute	41.9	48.3	56.1	na
Universiti Teknologi MARA ( Then Institute)	32.4	42.9	45.8	na
Tunku Abdul Rahman College	23.5	33.9	37.2	na
<u>Stream</u>				
Arts	47.4	61.0	64.8	71.8
Science	24.5	36.3	44.7	53.5
Vocational	24.2	30.4	22.0	37.8
Technical	4.3	27.1	35.9	29.4

Source: Malaysia 1991 (b) & 2000

### Women in the industrial sectors

Among those who were employed over the decades 1970-2000, there were marked shifts in industrial composition. As may be seen in Table 5, the industrial groupings that were comprised mostly of women in 1970 were agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing sector (67.9 percent), community, social and personal services sector (16.4 percent), and manufacturing sector (8.1 percent). Women became the majority of workers in agriculture in 1970 and 1980 only, but in 2000 their proportionate role in agriculture had declined. Women continued to be the majority of workers in the manufacturing sector since 1995 until 2000. The large majority of women in manufacturing in 1970 were producing footwear (26.0 percent). Women's interest in producing footwear had declined drastically in 1980 with only 1.3 percent. The involvement had diverted to other sub-sector, especially in the manufacture of electrical machinery, and wearing apparel (Table 6).

As previously noted, there has been considerable growth in recent decades in such capital-intensive industries such as manufacture of machinery and transport equipment. Although these industries are predominantly male, the female share in

the manufacture of machinery was 1.3 percent and 1.1 percent in the manufacture of transport equipment in 1991. The growth in women's share of the labour force at a time when their overall share in agriculture was declining can be explained largely by women's increasing share in the manufacturing and the service sector.

**Table 5** Percent distribution of employed women by industry group, Malaysia

Industry	1970	1980	1991	1995
1 Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing	67.9	49.4	22.5	15.9
2 Mining and quarrying	0.7	0.3	0.2	0.1
3 Manufacturing	8.1	16.3	28.6	30.1
4 Electricity, gas and water	0.1	0	0.2	1.8
5 Construction	0.5	1	1	0.2
6. Wholesale and retail trade and restaurants and hotels	5.8	11.2	15.8	19.3
7 Transport, storage and communication	0.5	0.7	1.2	1.8
8 Financing, insurance, real estate and business services	na	1.6	4.7	5.6
9. Community, social & personal services	16.4	19.5	25.8	25.2
10 Unknown	na	na	na	na
	100	100	100	100

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980, 1991 (a), 1995 & 2000

Note: na. - Not available

**Table 6** Distribution of female working population in the manufacturing sector, Malaysia

	1970*	1980*	1991*
Food manufacturing	14.8	9.6	6.6
Beverage industries	0.9	0.8	0.4
Tabacco manufactures	5.3	1.6	0.6
Manufacture of textiles	9.5	9.6	3.9
Manufacture of wearing apparel	na	19.6	18.7
Manufacture of leather & products of leather	0.4	0.2	0.3
Manufacture of footwear	26.0	1.3	1.4
Manufacture of wood and & cork products	17.7	6.5	5.4
Manufacture of furniture & fixtures	0.6	1.5	1.9
Manufacture of paper & paper products	1.8	1.1	1.1
Printing, publishing & allied industries	3.9	2.8	2.2
Manufacture of industrial chemicals	3.4	0.4	0.3
Manufacture of other chemical products	na	1.8	1.2
Petroleum refineries	na	0.2	0.2
Man. of miscellaneous products of petroleum & coal	0.1	0.0	0.0
Manufacture of rubber products	4.8	5.0	4.5

**Table 6** (cont...)

	1970*	1980*	1991*
Manufacture of plastic products not elsewhere classified	na	2.5	3.0
Manufacture of pottery, china & earthenware	na	0.2	0.6
Manufacture of glass & and glass products	td	0.3	0.3
Manufacture of non-metallic mineral products	2.5	1.9	1.1
Iron & steel basic industries	0.5	0.6	0.6
Non-ferrous metal basic industries	na	0.1	0.1
Manufacture of fabricated metal products	2.0	2.3	1.8
Manufacture of machinery	0.5	0.6	1.3
Man.of electrical machinery,	1.2	22.4	33.5
Manufacture of transport equipment	0.8	0.7	1.1
Man.of professional & scientific & measuring &	na	0.6	1.5
Controlling equipment not elsewhere classified & of photographic & optical goods			
Other manufacturing industries	3.3	5.7	6.4
Total manufacturing	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number	77634	238920	522818

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980 & 1991 (a)

Note: na – not available

\* working population age 10 years and above

\* data for 2000 not available

### Women in the occupational groups

The industrial shift that occurred among the employed corresponds to the occupational changes. In 1970's, about two-thirds of the employed women are doing agricultural work. However, the pattern is not the same in 2000. A notable decline occurred for the agricultural workers, from 66.8 percent in 1970 to 9.2 percent in 2000. We see in Table 7 that women are more involved in the production work and doing professional type of job. They represented about 31.6 percent of the women working population as production workers in 2000 as compared to only 10.4 percent in 1970. Concurrently, women also increased their share in professional, technical and related work, from 5.3 percent in 1970 to 20.6 percent in 2000. Other notable increases include among the clerical workers, from 4.1 percent in 1970 to 17.9 percent in 2000.

**Table 7** Percent distribution of employed women by occupational group, Malaysia

No	Occupation	1970	1980	1991	1995	2000
1.	Professional, technical and related workers	5.3	8.5	13.1	13.5	20.6
2.	Administrative and managerial workers	0.1	0.3	1.4	1.9	4.6
3.	Clerical and related workers	4.1	11.1	16.4	17.6	17.9



**Table 7** (cont...)

No	Occupation	1970	1980	1991	1995	2000
4.	Sales workers	4.9	7.2	8.9	11.3	12.9
5.	Service workers	8.4	9	12.1	13.4	-
6.	Agricultural, animal husbandry & forestry workers, fishermen & hunters	66.8	46.3	21.9	15.8	9.2
7.	Production and related workers, transport equipment operators and labourers	10.4	17.6	26.2	26.5	31.6
8.	Unknown	na	na	na	na	3.2

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1991 (a) & (b), 1995 & 2000

Note: na - not available

It is also interesting to see the distribution of working women by age-group in 1991 and 2000 (Table 8). Majority of women work during the productive age that is between the ages of 25-44. However, the distribution is quite different by occupational groups. The percentage is at its highest between the age-group of 25-44 in occupational category such as the administrative and managerial, and clerical workers. Many of the sales and services, and agricultural workers are in the 45-64 age-group; whilst production workers are young women between the ages of 15-24.

**Table 8** Percentage distribution of employed women by occupation and age group, Malaysia

Occupations	15-24		25-44		45-64	
	1991	2000	1991	2000	1991	2000
Professional & technical	8.5	1.7	16.7	5.2	8.2	6.9
Administrative & managerial	0.6	13.8	2	25.1	0.6	14.8
Clerical	17.6	22.1	18.9	18.7	3.4	8.5
Sales	9	15.4	8.1	11.4	11.1	14.5
Services	12.1	-	11.6	-	13	-
Agriculture	9.9	4.2	19.9	7.3	53.1	24
Production	40.9	38.5	21.7	29.4	9.6	28.6
Inadequate information	1.3	4.3	1.1	2.9	1.1	2.7
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Number ('000)	595.4	701	1048.8	1575.3	280	437.1

Source: Malaysia 1991 (a) & 2000

## Factors influencing changes in employment structure

Secondary data showed that women's involvement in the labour force have increased in 2000 as compared to 1970. They are now participating in all type of jobs. There are four factors that can be considered to influence these changes to occur, that is:

1. the changing structure of the economy
2. level of formal education received

3. the attitude of the society
4. the division of domestic labour

#### **i. Economic structure**

The economic structure of Malaysia begins with the import-substitution type of industry introduced in 1958 until 1968. The import-oriented industrialization strategy focused on the usage of local raw materials and does not require high level of technology and skilled. Therefore, women have easy access into sectors such as the agriculture sector, becoming farmers. In this type of work too, the working hours are flexible and they can bring their children to the field. The work they do, do not require any training nor do they handle any heavy machinery. With the increase in labour force, the import-substitution industry cannot provide jobs for them. Therefore, high unemployment problems have encouraged the government to introduce export-oriented industrialization, implemented in the early 1970's focusing on labour-intensive industries. This had encouraged multinational companies to invest in Malaysia by offering cheap labour and financial incentives. The inflow of foreign investment was largely in the manufacturing sector. Both the electronics and textile/garment industries relied heavily on female workers because they could be paid lower wages and were deemed dexterous and obedient to the employer. In 1980's the heavy industry strategy was implemented whereby high capital and technology are required. In 1990's and prolonged to 2000, the industrialization strategy of Malaysia was one on technology. Emphasis is on high technology and capital-intensive type of industry. These various processes of industrialization showed changes in women's role in the economy. Women increased their presence in the workforce since 1970. They play an important role in the success of the Malaysian economy.

#### **ii. Education**

Education is another important criteria used in employing workers in the formal sector. Secondary education is very important for the entry into the modern sector. The rate of women who attended school in 1970 was only 49.0 percent as compared to 90.0 percent in 2000. The rate of those who achieved secondary level of schooling in 1970 was only 40.6 percent. However, the rate of those who received tertiary education had increased from 29.1 percent in 1970 to 47.3 percent in 2000. The low achievement rate of women in education in 1970 is related to the domestic division of labour. According to the human capital theory by Walby (1988), daughters are needed to look after their younger sisters and brothers and to help doing the housework. The stream of education received also influenced women to choose a suitable work for themselves. The number of female students in science and technical stream is very encouraging. In 1970, only 24.5 percent choose to be in the science stream as compared to 53.5 percent in 2000. The rate in technical schools had also increased from 4.3 percent in 1970 to 29.4 percent in 2000.

### **iii. Attitude of society**

Another factor that influenced the changing patterns of woman's employment is the attitude of the society. The narrow perception of the society towards work influence the type of work woman chooses to do in 1970. According to one of the respondent from the first generation, "...my mother does not encourage me to go to school. She prefers me to stay at home looking after the siblings and to help her in the kitchen". This particular respondent also received negative perception after she got married. Her husband and mother-in-law object to her working as a production operator. Due to the disagreement, she was able to be in the labour market for only two months. Society had set a standard to the type of work suitable for women. However, with education the attitude of the society towards work had changed. They do not categorize work as 'women's work' and 'men's work'.

### **iv. Division of domestic labour**

The work carried out in the private sphere also influenced the type of work carried out by women in the 2000's. There is no more a strict division of domestic labour as what had happened in the 1970's. According to one of the respondent from the first generation:

During her teenage years, the work she had been doing are carrying water from the well, looking for firewood, washing and ironing the clothes, cleaning the house, looking after the children, educate the children to behave well, helping to look after the livestock, working in the rice field when required, and to sew the clothes.

In the year 2000, the division of labour had changed. Members of the family do not make any specific rule as who should do the housework, such as cooking, cleaning, sending the children to school and attending to the children when they are ill. The housework is not the responsibility of the women only but also other male members of the family. With the help given by other family members enables women to be involved in the labour force.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at the detailed occupational structure of the Malaysia labour force. It has examined policy changes instituted by the government, that is, from import-substitution industrialization to an adoption of export-promotion strategy based upon foreign direct investment for continued growth rates. It has shown that economic development in Malaysia has depended heavily on the role of women, in providing the supply of labour necessary for export-led development on the factors that influenced the changing employment structure.

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