

THE MALAYSIA WOMEN AND GIRLS FORUM 2022 REPORT



UNITED NATIONS
MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE,
BRUNEI DARUSSALAM





MWGF

Malaysia Women & Girls Forum

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ABOUT MWGF

The Malaysia Women & Girls Forum (MWGF) is an annual event that brings together multiple stakeholders involved in the social and economic advancement of women and girls in Malaysia. The forum identifies, engages and tracks key social, economic and legislative changes that are needed to accelerate the rights and well-being of Malaysia's women and girls. MWGF is open to the public with panelists and speakers from the civil, nongovernmental, academic, legislative, youth, public and private sectors representations respectively. The Forum is executed by its own secretariat (appointed by UNFPA on behalf of the UN Gender Results Group).

MWGF OBJECTIVES

MWGF aims to be the bridge that connects the public, civil society and policy stakeholders in rapidly advancing the necessary social, economic and political solutions needed for Malaysia's women and girls. Funded and supported by the UN and UNFPA Malaysia, MWGF collectively amplifies, tracks and provides proactive recommendations and solutions on the progress of advancing the rights and wellbeing of Malaysia's women and girls.

MWGF PILLARS



**Building towards the
2030 Sustainable
Development Goals
(SDG)**



**Attaining Gender
Equality**



**Ending Gender-based
Violence and Harmful
Practices**



**Ending Unmet Need for
Family Planning**



**Ending Preventable
Maternal Death**



**Attaining Full Potential
of Young People**

MWGF 2022 THEME



Expanding Women's Rights Through Economic Equity

Women make up 50% of Malaysia's population, yet the country has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates (LFPR) amongst upper middle income countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted Women's economic opportunities due to myriad socio-economic, cultural and accessibility issues & barriers. With less economic representation and equity, it means women's rights, choices and their ability to lead social and rights based narratives are diminishing.

MWGF 2022 aims to identify barriers, understand causes and outline solutions & opportunities that can accelerate Malaysia's Female LFPR, economic equity and boost economic recovery. Malaysia clearly has a dormant economic might that needs be unleashed and doing so would propel the country towards achieving the 2030 SDGs.



MWGF 2022 PROGRAMME



10:05 AM

Welcome Address

10:10 AM

Opening Remarks

10:15 AM

Keynote Address

10:25 AM

MWGF 2022 Launch

10:30 AM

Guidelines and Overview

10:40 AM - 11:00 AM

Soft Launch of Special Report on: "Enhancing Human Capital Through Sexual & Reproductive Health Investments & Family Support Policies in Malaysia" by UNFPA Malaysia, Economic Planning Unit (EPU) Malaysia & Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health

11:00 AM - 11:45 AM

Plenary Session 1 - The impact of Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights (SRHR) on Malaysia's Women & Girls and their Economic Equity

11:45 AM - 12:25 PM

Keynote Session 2: Understanding Social Norms & Gender Differences in LFPR - perspectives on Malaysia's low female LFPR

12:35 PM - 1:30 PM

Lunch Break

1:30 PM - 2:35 PM

Plenary Session 2: From gaps to opportunity - The burden of Unpaid care-work and the transformation to the care economy.

2:35 PM - 3:15 PM

Keynote 3: Understanding the multi-dimensional poverty of economically marginalised women and establishing key life-cycle interventions.

3:15 PM - 4:30 PM

Plenary Session 3: Levelling the Playing field - The social & youth narrative

4:30 PM - 4:35 PM

MWGF 2022 Resolution

4:40 PM

Closing Ceremony

★ 15TH DEC 2022 ★ SIME DARBY CONVENTION CENTRE ★

MWGF 2022 RESOLUTIONS

1

Enhance women's economic equity and economic independence to improve Malaysia's female labour force participation rate and subsequently its GDP growth and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

2

Invest in comprehensive sexuality education to reduce unplanned pregnancies which will allow girls to continue their right to education and economic opportunities.

3

Invest in the care industry to address unpaid care work that often disproportionately burdens women.

4

Reform laws to mandate equal parental leave, which will shape how the next generation approaches gender roles in parenting.

5

Address gender-stereotyping attitudes at home, work and within politics that impede women's participation in the labour force.

6

Gender-responsive budgeting and economic decisions must include the lived realities of marginalised communities and the disabled.

Keynote Session 1

YB Dato' Sri Nancy binti Shukri

Minister of Women, Family & Community Development



It is a great pleasure and honour to be here with you at the 3rd annual Malaysia Women & Girls Forum. I would like to extend my thanks to the United Nations Malaysia, United Nations Population Fund, as well as the secretariat of the Malaysia Women & Girls Forum 2022 for developing and organising this solution centric platform.

Malaysia's women and girls are the heart and soul of our beloved nation. Ensuring the wellbeing and economic equity of half of our population is essential not only for Malaysia's development, but also to ensure full pandemic economic recovery. This would be possible through a whole of society approach in encouraging women and girls' full participation.

These past three years have been truly challenging in our nation's history. The economic challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have spilled over and caused loss or reduction in the people's income. This, combined with escalating costs of living, has further impacted our communities but none more so than our women and girls, especially those from the already vulnerable backgrounds, such as the B40, single female headed households, rural women and those in remote communities around Sabah and Sarawak.

This is why it is very timely that the MWGF 2022 theme is Expanding Women's Rights Through Economic Equity. We have witnessed the sacrifices and incredible fortitude of Malaysian women and girls throughout the pandemic and the ongoing economic recovery period.

Now, it is time to focus on strategically rebuilding our social fabric and expanding our economic might for the benefit of all Malaysian families. There is no better way to do this than empowering every individual's economic agency by providing access to resources, financial or otherwise, as this will allow women, in particular, to take charge of their lives.

Malaysia's women have indeed made immense strides in women's empowerment, women's education levels, lowering maternal mortality rates and gender equality over the past 65 years. In fact, in the late 1950s when Malaya first gained independence, women made up just 10.7 per cent of the total undergraduate population at Universiti Malaya (UM).

Today, women currently entail an impressive 62% of Universiti Malaya's undergraduate population, far outranking the men! Despite more female students in universities and women also being more likely to graduate as compared to men, they are still vastly underrepresented in the labour force.

According to the Graduate Statistics 2021 from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM), female graduates make up more than half of the unemployment rate (54.2 per cent) as compared to male graduates (45.8 per cent). The majority of unemployed female graduates cited unpaid care work which includes housework or family responsibilities as keeping them outside of the labour force.

This, then leads to Malaysia having one of the lowest Female Labour Force Participation Rates (LFPR) in the region. Our overall female LFPR currently stands at 55.6 per cent as of July 2022. Meanwhile, male LFPR registered at a healthy 82 per cent. Bridging this gap between men and women in the workforce will definitely galvanise the sleeping economic might of Malaysia's female labour force.

We must also not forget to address job losses of Malaysia's women during the pandemic in hard hit industries which have yet to recover, such as the tourism, services and retail sectors. This has also further impacted household incomes and points to a critical need for investment in industries worst impacted by pandemic related factors.

Additionally, with more women working in sunset industries, there are great opportunities to up-skill or re-skill their existing female labour force, making them more resilient towards future shocks.

Increased female LFPR not only helps boost household income, but also guarantees sufficient labour in competitive sectors in emerging economies like Malaysia's. There is also further opportunity for identifying industries with potential for increasing female LFPR.

Malaysia's economic recovery clearly can and should be shaped around increasing women's LFPR. I quote The World Bank 2019 Malaysia Country Report: Breaking Barriers, "If all economic barriers are removed for women in Malaysia, the country's income per capita could grow by 26.2 per cent – implying an average annual income gain of RM9,400".

Ladies and Gentlemen, increasing women's economic participation can treble Malaysia's economic recovery efforts, which will afford us much needed economic resilience in the challenging post pandemic years to come. We must then strategically address the main impediments to women's labour force participation.

There is still room for improvement in terms of family support policies such as a comprehensive sexuality education and reproductive health services, for example family planning services and accessibility to feminine care which extends to young girls, as well as a comprehensive childcare plan to attract women to come back to work, both which are seen as stacked factors that keep women and girls from reaching their full potential. The commitment to support women by building a society of equal opportunities is reflected in on-going legislative reforms, policies and plans.

It is important that women's rights through economic equity can further be achieved through targeted Gender Responsive Budgeting – towards ensuring that no one is left behind – especially women from vulnerable backgrounds during our pandemic economic recovery.

Increasing opportunities particularly for women in informal sectors while revitalising female employment in hard hit industries can become immediate economic gains. Overall gender sensitised national economic recovery efforts via strategic investments, inter-agency collaboration and multi-stakeholder partnerships will place Malaysia firmly on the path towards attaining the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals – especially SDG 5, while also fulfilling the targets of the 12th Malaysia Plan.

Ladies and Gentlemen, as Malaysia charts her recovery from the devastating impacts of the pandemic, Malaysian women's untapped talent and economic potential is key to national recovery and propelling the country towards achieving the 2030 SDG's. Investing in women's sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, is investment in women's economic independence and Malaysia's guaranteed economic growth and recovery.

I would like to again congratulate the United Nations, the United Nations Population Fund Malaysia and the MWGF secretariat for your time and effort in developing this solution centric platform – that works in tandem with our policy of elevating the safety and wellbeing of our women and girls.

WELCOME NOTE



Karima El-Korri

*United Nations Resident Coordinator For Malaysia,
Singapore & Brunei Darussalam*

Yang Berhormat Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri – Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Dr. Asa Torkelsson, UNFPA Representative for Malaysia and Country Director for Thailand, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen:

Good morning.

It is a privilege to be with you today and on behalf of the United Nations in Malaysia, I welcome you to this 3rd edition of the Malaysia Women & Girls Forum: Expanding Women's Rights Through Economic Equity. We are especially honored that Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri, Minister of Women, Family and Community Development was able to join us today.

I congratulate my colleagues at UNFPA Malaysia, the Gender Results Group and their partners for this unique platform for dialogue, advocacy, and solutions, and for bringing together a stellar lineup of speakers, panelists and an audience full of energy and great ideas, committed to the cause of advancing and empowering women and girls in Malaysia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The past three years have brought a series of mutually reinforcing crises. In addition to a devastating pandemic, the world has to withstand a perfect storm fueled by war, food and energy shortages, cost-of-living crises and increasingly severe impacts of climate change.

Recovery from these multiple traumas calls for urgency, ambition and scale. Ensuring that no one is left behind and delivering sustainable development for everyone everywhere must be our priority, and women and girls must be high up on the list.

There is no doubt that women and girls are among those that have suffer first and the most.

I drafted this sentence and stopped to ask why? Why should women and girls systematically be among those that are hit the hardest?

Despite decades-long efforts to empower half of humanity, we are not there yet. On a daily basis, and more so in times of crisis, any crisis, we worry first about girls dropping out of schools, about child marriage, about various forms of violence against women and girls, about lost livelihoods or limited access to sexual and reproductive health.

But in a country like Malaysia, with such promising economic prospects and well-educated female human capital, we should not worry. And yet we do, and numbers and trends do tell us that we should still be concerned because barriers to women's effective participation and empowerment stand stubbornly still.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This year's forum is about economic equity, a true enabler of empowerment and prosperity.

Economic inequities contribute to further digging the inequality gap. Economic under-representation creates a vicious cycle of vulnerability, perpetuated by social stigmas, poverty, unequal access to healthcare, to justice and weak political representation and participation.

Malaysia's female labour force participation rate stood at 55.6 per cent as of July 2022. Meanwhile, male labour force participation was at a much healthier 82.5 per cent.

In July also, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index – which assesses countries on how well they distribute resources and opportunities among their male and female populations – ranked Malaysia 103rd out of 146 countries. Only two ASEAN member States ranked below Malaysia.

These startling facts trigger the same question. Why? Why Malaysia?

With some of the highest rates of female enrolment in primary, secondary and tertiary education globally, Malaysia has the means to perform better, by deconstructing legislative and social obstacles that women and girls have to face every day, and which suffocate their potential for economic progress.

Addressing economic inequities goes beyond labour market policies that promote women's participation. It starts at the structural level, by addressing a myriad of interlocked issues, ranging from legal protection to unpaid care-work, to GBV, to access to finance, to social protection, to Sexual and Reproductive Health, to harmful practices.

So every move to address one of these challenges is a move towards economic equity.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There are many reasons to be optimistic in Malaysia. Several recently promulgated laws, such as the Anti-Sexual Harassment and Anti-Stalking Bills, the Housewives Social Security Act as well as amendments to the Employment Act, all contribute to protecting women's fundamental rights and advancing the equality agenda.



The new unity government is a historic opportunity for Malaysia to chart a pathway that matches its capabilities and enables it to devise effective strategies and solutions in line with the SDGs and international conventions. Women must have an undisputed centre-stage position, both as a targets and contributors.

It is estimated that investing in removing barriers obstructing women's economic participation would result in an additional 5 million contributors to the local economy. This income alone, as outlined by the 2019 World Bank report 'Breaking Barriers', could be as much as RM10,000 per capita – elevating Malaysia to a high-income nation.

Such a transformational approach is both necessary and possible. Malaysia can be bolder and has the means to get women and girls out of the vulnerability trap.

The United Nations Country Team stands by the Government, civil society, the private sector and all engaged stakeholders as the country builds and strengthens the foundations of a prosperous future which equally benefits men and women, girls and boys.

Maintaining this Forum as an annual meeting point of key players is one among many initiatives to ensure that these strong voices, success stories and accumulation of recommendations across the themes can inspire policies, decisions and action.

I congratulate UNFPA for another successful in-person edition of the Malaysia Women and Girls Forum and wish you fruitful discussions

Thank you for your attention.

OPENING REMARKS



Dr. Asa Torkelsson

*United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Malaysia
Representative*

Yang Berhormat Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri, Minister of Women, Family & Community Development, Yang Berbahagia, Datuk Dr. Maziah Che Yusoff, Secretary General of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Ms Karima El Korri, the United Nations Resident Coordinator for Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei Darussalam. To all of our esteemed Speakers, panelists, moderators, guests and Members of the Media, here present and virtually connected,

A very good morning to everyone... and Selamat Datang, to the 3rd Malaysia Women & Girls Forum.

It is a joy to witness this annual meeting becoming an institution in Malaysia, growing year by year. I thank the visionaries and change makers for realizing this.

Today, we are honoured to have the Minister of Women, Family and Community Development, Yang Berhormat Dato' Sri Nancy Shukri as our Guest of Honour to launch MWGF 2022.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For many countries where I have served, struggling with development before; Malaysia, and other advanced upper middle income countries, were looked to as a model, or dream, to aspire to. Other countries may see the beautiful paradise-like Malaysia. Today, we are gathered as change agents to discern and activate solutions for the advancement of women and girls in Malaysia, to charter equitable options and thriving conditions for every one's potential to be harnessed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today's theme is "Expanding Women's Rights Through Economic Equity".

This is a timely and necessary perspective for several reasons.

We have seen that the challenges from the COVID stressors worldwide were more pronounced for women and girls, with their health and economic wellbeing suffered, additional care duties, and increased rates of gender based violence, including child marriage; referred to as the 'shadow pandemic'.



A study by UNFPA-UNICEF in Malaysia showed that urban poverty had also deepened and the impacts for women were relatively more severe, following the COVID pandemic. Also, as Ms. Karima El Korri, our UN resident coordinator, reminded us, in Malaysia, there is a gap of about 27% between women's and men's labour force participation, that of women being one of the lowest in the region.

In addition to disparities in accessing the paid labour market, women are mostly providing Unpaid Care Work, which includes caring for the elderly, child care, and other housework.

On the theme of economic equity, disparities are also observed in access to finance, the Gender Pay Gap, social security, parental leave, just to mention a few areas.

Taken together, economic inequities cascade impacts that touch every part and stage of women's lives.

Ladies and gentlemen:

For an upper middle-income country, such as Malaysia, eyeing the high income path, providing opportunities for women's labour force participation and expanding the care economy represent an extraordinary untapped potential for growth, which can also expedite progress towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While this may seem a complex challenge, from the point of view of UNFPA, the United Nations reproductive health agency that I represent, there are quick wins as by expanding women's reproductive choices, our productive choices can be enlarged too.

Indeed, UNFPA's abundant research shows that investing in the health, well-being and potential of women and girls is an investment into the health, well-being and prosperity of a country, its presence and future. Being able to choose the number, timing and spacing of children can bolster economic and social development.

Later today, we will launch in 'soft manner' a study undertaken by the Economic Planning Unit of Malaysia, in collaboration with UNFPA and the Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health.

It estimates the return on sexual & Reproductive Health investments, showing that they pay off abundantly. Without here and now anticipating the findings, it offers, and costs, different policy options, all with positive results and shows convincingly the policy-related investments that create win-win situations.

Furthermore, the multiplier effect from making these investments, coupled with inclusion, will expedite prosperous and peaceful Malaysia and can disrupt the poverty cycles confronting many already economically vulnerable, particularly women and girls.

Ladies and gentlemen:

In finalizing the report, we travelled across Malaysia and I was able to meet with amazing women and men, girls and boys who in addition to other duties, served wholeheartedly in communities in various ways. You will see some photos from these meetings featuring in the report and on display here.

Beyond the findings of the report, women face multiple constraints throughout out life course, that can be easily addressed. For example, easy measures, such as providing proper menstrual hygiene products, may keep young girls in school, or workplace. An expanded care economy, flexible policies and harassment free workplaces can provide entry and keep women in the workforce. Comprehensive sexuality educations can save and enhance lives.

Today we will hear about many inspiring solutions!

By providing reproductive choices we can expand women's productive choices, and the two are intimately linked together, in our lived experience, are the variables of our life equation. Hence, ability to engage actively in for example family planning, or 'life strategizing', contributes to the positive growth and wellbeing spiral benefiting all.

In addition, there is tremendous opportunity for strategic investments into national infrastructure, by converting Unpaid Care Work into a nascent Care Economy, offering individual opportunity, wellbeing and prosperity.

The report will present many solutions, ready to be implemented.



Even speaking strictly economically, the investment pays off, abundantly! It should be an investors' dream.

In addition, investments in sexual and reproductive health build meaningful lives, and treasures fully Malaysia's most precious resource, its people, strengthening human capital, to radiate present and future wealth forever.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This point in time requires a determined restoration and activation of connectedness and engagement, tilting challenges into possibilities, networking and resetting the collaborative trend.

This is what UNFPA desires to do and what we can do today: to nurture a radically collaborative culture, and we look forward to intensify our culture of genuine partnership.

Next year, UNFPA Malaysia will be commemorating 50 years of working hand in hand, should to shoulder with the Government and people of Malaysia and we will continue to invest in developing rights-based and evidence-based roadmaps, solutions and advocacy - ensuring that all are included, and no one is left behind, regardless of age, gender, creed or ethnic background.

Economic Equity is one important foundation that provides everyone with the opportunities for growth, exploration, achievement, and sense of security; a stepping stone for strategizing for life and living our hope and aspirations!

It provides us with the power of agency, to be the best version of ourselves and to further uplift the country we call home into its full boundless potential, especially desired for by women and girls, who make up about half of Malaysia's population.

With that, I would once again like to thank each and every one of you for joining us here today, both here as well as those connecting from home or office.

I wish us all a fruitful and impactful MWGF 2022.

I thank you.

Speakers, Panelists & Moderators



**Yang Berhormat
Dato' Sri Hajah
Nancy Shukri**

Minister of Women,
Family and Community
Development, Malaysia



Karima El Korri

United Nations
Resident Coordinator
for Malaysia, Singapore
& Brunei Darussalam



Dr. Asa Torkelsson

United Nations
Population Fund
(UNFPA) Malaysia
Representative



**Yang Berhormat
Lim Yi Wei**

Kampung Tunku
Assembly person, DAP
Women Selangor
Organising Secretary,
DAPSY Damansara
Chief



**Yang Berhormat
Rodziah Ismail**

Member of Parliament,
Ampang



Suraya Zainuddin

Financial Blogger



**Dato' Dr. Hartini
Zainudin**

Co-Founder, Yayasan
Chow Kit & Child Rights
Activist



Tehmina Kaosji

MWGF Head of
Secretariat,
Independent Broadcast
Journalist & Gender
Equality Activist



Dr. Saizi Xiao

Assistant Professor
and Director of External
Engagement, School of
Economics, University
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**Sumitra
Visvanathan**

Executive Director,
Women's Aid
Organisation (WAO)



Davide De Beni

Health Economist at
United Nations
Population Fund
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**Professor Dr.
Shanthi Thambiah**

Gender Studies
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MWGF Head of
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Journalist & Gender
Equality Activist



**Associate
Professor Dr.
Sharifah Syahirah
S. Sheikh**

Senior Lecturer Kolej
Universiti Poly-Tech
MARA (KUPTM)



Petra Gimbad

Former Secretary,
Reproductive Rights
Advocacy Alliance
Malaysia (RRAAM)

Speakers, Panelists & Moderators



**Nisshanthan
Dhanapalan**

Communications
Consultant



Rashaad Ali

Chief Strategy &
Operations Officer,
Social & Economic
Research Initiative
(SERI)



Dr John Teo

Consultant Obstetrician
& Gynaecologist,
Sexual & Reproductive
Health and Family
Planning Advocate



**Yiswaree
Palansamy**

Senior Correspondent,
Malay Mail



Tashny Sukumaran

Senior Analyst, Institute
Of Strategic &
International Studies
(ISIS)



**Miza Marsya
Roslan**

Persons with Disabilities
(PWD) Youth Advocate,
Assistant Secretary of
Spinal Muscular Atrophy
Malaysia (SMAM)



Sazriena Razali

Student & Head of
Bureau for Culture &
Activity Persatuan
Mahasiswa Orang Asli
(PMOA)



Amirul Ruslan

Independent Journalist,
Photographer and
Writer



Serena C

Host & Emcee of
MWGF



Dato' Dr. Narimah Awini

Former Chairperson of National Population &
Family Health Development Malaysia (LPPKN),
Former Director, Family Health Development
Division, Ministry of Health Malaysia & Former
Regional Advisor, Maternal and Reproductive
Health, World Health Organisation (WHO)

Soft Launch of Report: Enhancing Human Capital Through Sexual & Reproductive Health Investments and Family Support Policies in Malaysia



This report, a joint collaboration between UNFPA Malaysia, The Economic Planning Unit (EPU) of Malaysia & The Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health focuses and evidences how Malaysia can enhance her human capital, via strategic investments in Sexual & Reproductive Health as well as vital family support services in order to increase the county's female labour participation rate and in tandem achieve essential milestones, such as the 2030 SDGs and the realisation of the 12th Malaysia plan.



Or visit:
<https://malaysia.unfpa.org/en/publications>



Plenary Session 1

The impact of Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights on Malaysia's Women & Girls and their Economic Equity

Taking perspectives and findings from the UNFPA, EPU & T.H Chan Harvard School of Public Health report, while emphasising SRHR access as key to reducing unplanned pregnancies and women's unpaid care labour.

SRHR access increases women and girls attaining their full potential, on a personal level as well as through female labour force participation rate (LFPR), economic productivity and overall national development.

Moderator



Tehmina Kaosji

MWGF Head of Secretariat

Panelist #1



Dato Dr. Narimah Awin

Technical Advisor on Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights UNFPA Malaysia

Panelist #2



Dato' Dr. Hartini Zainudin

Co-Founder, Yayasan Chow Kit & Child Rights Activist

Panelist #3



Petra Gimbad

Former Secretary, Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia (RRAAM)

Panelist #4



Dr. John Teo

Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist, Sexual & Reproductive Health and Family Planning Advocate

Plenary Session 1

Key Takeaways

1

The government ought to implement the Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan of Action in full, without diluting or delaying it. Bodies like the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) could organise a multi-stakeholder, inter-agency workshop on how this Plan could be implemented in schools.

2

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) needs to cover more than abstinence, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Students need to be taught how to respect themselves, how to respect their partner, what consent looks like and how to obtain consent.

3

When wanting to access CSE and family planning services, some women face financial, logistical and/or religious barriers.

4

Another barrier to accessing CSE and family planning services was the quality of such care by healthcare service providers. Some women decided to never seek such services again after experiencing poor quality of care. This could include judgement or discrimination from healthcare providers based on the woman's marital status.

5

Some girls dropped out of school during the Covid-19 pandemic because one or both of their parents had passed away and they had to shoulder the responsibility to care for younger siblings.

6

Impoverished households were facing severe malnutrition to the point that some women could not breastfeed their babies as they themselves had no food.

7

If women do not have access to family planning, they will be less able to plan when to get pregnant. This, in turn, will affect their ability to attain education, employment and continued employment.

8

The government ought to invest more in family support policies to reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies in Malaysia. This would reduce disruptions to women's education and career, improving their economic equity.

9

The three main factors contributing to maternal mortality are antenatal care, safe delivery and family planning. The Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted all three factors, contributing to a rise in maternal mortality in Malaysia to rates not seen since the 1980s.

10

The Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia (RRAAM) received calls on its hotline during the Covid-19 pandemic from women who wanted information on safe abortions because they could not afford to have a baby.

Dato Dr. Narimah Awin

Technical Advisor on Sexual & Reproductive Health & Rights UNFPA Malaysia

“

As for what was standing in the way of research on women, women's health and family planning, Dr Narimah lamented that a lack of funding was not the only challenge.

”



Sexual and reproductive health expert Dr Narimah Awin hoped that the government would finally get serious in implementing the Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan of Action.

While the original 2009-2012 Plan of Action has since been updated, she hoped the National Population and Family Development Board (known by its Malay acronym LPPKN) would revise its own advisory council to comprise more experts.

She proposed that the government invest more money in implementing CSE in schools, perhaps teaching it as a standalone subject rather than merely as a module or activity within existing subjects.

To aid this endeavour, Dr Narimah proposed that UNFPA Malaysia organise a multi-stakeholder, inter-agency workshop on how the latest Plan of Action could be implemented in schools.

When asked about what was standing in the way of CSE and family planning services, she outlined three barriers or “delays”. Some were not aware that they needed help, while others had difficulty accessing help that they wanted due to financial, logistic or religious barriers.

The third barrier or “delay” was some decided against ever seeking family planning services again after poor initial experiences. Elaborating on this particular barrier, Dr Narimah said it was incumbent upon the Ministry of Health to pay more attention to the quality of family planning care it provided so that patients would feel welcome and safe regardless of their marital status.

Healthcare professionals like doctors and nurses ought not to impose their personal and religious values upon the marital status of those seeking out contraceptive planning, she added. This was especially since there were no guidelines barring healthcare professionals from providing contraceptives to unmarried Muslims.

As for what was standing in the way of research on women, women's health and family planning, Dr Narimah lamented that a lack of funding was not the only challenge.

She shared that women were rarely respected as research subjects and medical trials were often performed on men only. She thus underscored the need for research to be done on women, for women and by women researchers.

Dato' Dr. Hartini Zainudin

Co-Founder, Yayasan Chow Kit & Child Rights Activist

“

More than 4,000 children had reportedly lost one or both parents over the pandemic. Young girls had become heads of households even though they had yet to finish formal education or secure a job.

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Over the Covid-19 pandemic, Dato Dr Hartini Zainudin observed that many childcare centres and nurseries were unable to sustain their business and closed down.

This has made it harder for women to access childcare, especially those from marginalised communities working in informal sector jobs that typically pay low salaries.

This was not the only consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic on marginalised communities. Dr.Tini pointed out that more than 4,000 children had reportedly lost one or both parents over the pandemic. Young girls had become heads of households even though they had yet to finish formal education or secure a job. Some had even dropped out of school to take care of their younger siblings. Should these girls be unable to complete their education and graduate with formal qualifications, this would make them less eligible for jobs.

Poverty and malnutrition was another problem. The Covid-19 pandemic had severely affected incomes, and how much food some households could afford. Hartini pointed out that women could not breastfeed their babies if the women themselves had no food.

She shared that some of her colleagues were sending almost expired milk formula by post to Sabah so mothers could feed their babies. She had seen cases of mothers feeding their babies a sugar-water mixture because they could not afford milk. She had also seen cases of mothers and babies dying from malnutrition. The situation had become so dire that she reached out to Dr John Teo to discuss how contraceptives could be provided to women from marginalised communities.

As for how social and cultural challenges play out on the ground, Dr.Tini pointed out a case where the police did not arrest a man for committing incest against his children and grandchildren due to a lack of evidence. Because it was the Covid-19 pandemic, his victims had to continue living in the same house. And they remained reliant on him as he was the main breadwinner in the family.

She hoped that the government would have the political will to implement the Sexual and Reproductive Health Action Plan in a way that did not dilute the plan.

The government should also regard reproductive health not just as a women's issue but as a public health issue, she said. And pay attention to how the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, for example, was prohibitively expensive for some women. A single dose can cost RM700 at private healthcare facilities. Women are advised to take three doses across their lifetime to protect against cervical cancer.

She also hoped that different ministries - health, communications, women etc - would collaborate to address food security, which will help improve malnutrition and education. Different ministries and agencies should also share data and resources with one another.

Dr.Tini added that the government should not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens when providing basic needs and welfare to the needy.

A photograph of Dr. John Teo, a man with short dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored checkered shirt. He is speaking into a microphone and gesturing with his hands. The background shows logos for WGF (Women & Girls Forum), UNFPA, United Nations, and CodeBlue.

Dr. John Teo

Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist, Sexual & Reproductive Health and Family Planning Advocate

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If women do not have access to family planning, they will be less able to plan when to get pregnant. This, in turn, will affect their ability to attain education, employment and continued employment.

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Dr. John Teo noted that UNFPA's latest report - "Enhancing Human Capital through Sexual and Reproductive Health Investments and Family Support Policies in Malaysia" - confirmed what was already known. Which is that if women do not have access to family planning, they will be less able to plan when to get pregnant. This, in turn, will affect their ability to attain education, employment and continued employment.

As an SRHR provider and expert working with women in Sabah, he cited cases of women who stopped working after getting pregnant and found it difficult to return to work. This was primarily due to a lack of childcare support.

Dr. John thus proposed that the government invest more in family support policies to reduce the rate of unintended pregnancies in Malaysia. This would reduce disruptions to women's education and career, improving their economic equity.

Dr. John also noted that maternal mortality rates had risen to levels not seen since the 1980s due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The three main factors contributing to maternal mortality are antenatal care, safe delivery and family planning.

Antenatal care is defined as medical care received during the course of pregnancy. During the Covid-19 pandemic, he said many pregnant women had preferred to stay home and thus received less antenatal care directly from healthcare professionals. Dr Teo underscored that expectant immigrant women were particularly affected. On top of Covid-19 concerns, they had to contend with the risk of being arrested by enforcement officers during raids on undocumented migrants. Furthermore, Covid-19 vaccination was only made available to pregnant women much later compared to the general population.

Safe delivery was affected during the Covid-19 pandemic when hospitals and the wider healthcare system became overwhelmed with Covid-19 cases. Family planning services, too, were not prioritised during the Covid-19 pandemic. It was placed on the backburner and not regarded as an essential service, said Dr. John.

What are some solutions? He said women need to be at the forefront of policy and research. Women also must be guaranteed access to antenatal care, family planning services and have no hindrance to safe delivery. By meeting all unmet needs when it comes to family planning services, Dr. John said maternal mortality could be reduced by up to 30 percent.

Petra Gimbad

Former Secretary, Reproductive Rights Advocacy Alliance Malaysia (RRAAM)

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In some communities, Petra said 18-year-old teenagers were already having children and would move on to their second spouses or marriages by the time they were in their early 20s.

”

RRAAM runs a hotline for women experiencing unplanned pregnancies and in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, Petra Gimbad shared that some callers had asked about where to get safe abortions. Women shared they could not afford to have a baby because they were out of work, their spouses were out of work and some had elderly parents living with them.

Speaking in relation to a new Syariah law criminalising pregnancies outside marriage in Terengganu, she said the average caller to the RRAAM hotline who was from Terengganu was 22-years-old with either no children or one to two children.

In some communities, Petra said 18-year-old teenagers were already having children and would move on to their second spouses or marriages by the time they were in their early 20s. Teenage sex and consequent unintended teenage pregnancy were prevalent in these communities. She was concerned about the health and economic impact of this trend, plus how it affects women's labour force participation rate.

As for improving family planning services, Petra said women and girls need to be able to access such services at Klinik Kesihatan or LPPKN regardless of marital status.

For example, an unmarried teenage girl may be asking a doctor about contraception because she is in an abusive relationship or a victim of incest. Or she may not have the economic capacity to handle a pregnancy or a child. Such girls should not be criminalised for asking a healthcare professional these questions.

Petra said that better CSE must cover more than abstinence, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Students need to be taught how to respect themselves, how to respect their partner, what consent looks like and how to obtain consent.

Lastly, policies on these issues must be compassionate and integrated, putting women and children first.

**Note: There was no Question and Answer segment for this session.*

Keynote Session 2



Understanding Social Norms & Gender Differences in LFPR - perspectives on Malaysia's low female LFPR

Join us for Dr. Saizi Xiao's presentation to learn why these social norms & gender differences matter and what can be done to close them, her recommendations for the Malaysian context, linking back to regional research & findings, while focusing on the context of pandemic economic recovery through women's economic equity and boosting women's low LFPR.

Moderator



Amirul Ruslan

Independent Journalist,
Photographer and Writer

Speaker



Dr. Saizi Xiao

Assistant Professor, School of
Economics, Department of
Social Sciences, University of
Nottingham

Keynote Session 2

Key Takeaways

1

Female labour force participation is really important for Malaysia to prosper & develop from a middle income country into a high income country.

2

Malaysia is ranked number 7 for female labour force participation rate (LFPR) and Gender Gap in the ASEAN countries, third highest in the region.

3

The unemployment rate during the pandemic surged to a higher level, the youth are suffering more, with an unemployment rate of 3-4 times higher than the average rate.

4

Most working age women who have completed their higher education in the labour force stay at home for a couple of years to look after their baby/children.

5

In Malaysia, the female LFPR against age cohort shows a typical single peak that indicates upon exit, women will not re-enter the labour force.

6

Occupational segregation - there is always a glass ceiling for women to be in the top management of a company and higher positions, as compared to men.

7

There's a phenomenon called "sticky floor" where women are forced to take lower paying and non skilled jobs.

8

Solution 1: Reduce the Gender Gap in paid family leave. If we are able to narrow the gender gap and parental leave between husbands and wives, we are able to increase our female LFPR in Malaysia and other countries.

9

Solution 2: Shifting norms and behaviour via social media campaigns to achieve gender equality in the female LFPR. Malaysia needs more impact analysis to produce more research findings to help the public and private sectors in improving social norms.

10

Solution 3: Provide women more financial control via digital accounts, encouraging female entrepreneurship. Increasing digital literacy, motivation, improving women's independent decision making, power of assets and financial resources within the family, and setting up individual bank accounts for women would have benefits for female employment in developing countries.

Keynote Session 2 Summary

Dr Saizi Xiao starts off by saying she is very lucky as not much research has been done in Malaysia on women and work regarding gender studies/status issues. She says she would like to use her research to inspire and help especially the underprivileged and vulnerable communities.

She starts with sharing why female LFPR is really important for Malaysia to prosper & grow from a middle income country into a high income country and how to change social norms not only within family but on a society level.

One of the important things for them is reducing the rate of death to achieve a high income country. She mentioned that in some of the African countries, the female LFPR is higher.

When compared, the female LFPR against the GDP per capita in the world by grouping 181 countries, some African countries provide labour intensive and low paying jobs therefore the female LFPR is higher than in other countries. On the other hand in Europe, where gender equality is recognised, the female LFPR is also high.

For countries suffering from the middle income trap, the female LFPR is insufficient during the transition to high income countries. In the ASEAN region, the GDP per capita of Malaysia is ranked number three among the ten ASEAN countries, third lowest in the ASEAN region. Malaysia is ranked number 7 for female labour force participation rate and gender gap in the ASEAN countries, third highest in the region. Malaysia is only slightly behind Singapore and Brunei. From a regional perspective, Malaysia's performance is not very satisfactory as well.

Dr.Saizi went on to explain that between 15-24 years old, the gap is larger compared to the general female LFPR. Another troubling statistic is that while unemployment surged during the pandemic, youth unemployment is 3-4 times higher than the average rate. Dr. Saizi reiterated that youth are suffering the most.

She then discussed working age women who have completed higher education and are in the labour force. There should be an increase in the female LFPR from this demographic until women marry and stay home for a couple of years to look after their baby. Once babies reach 5-6 years old, these mothers are able to put the child in school or a child care institution and then return to the labour force again. Female LFPR is meant to increase again once women finish raising a baby into a young child.

When approaching the retirement age, the female LFPR naturally declines again. This will allow us to see the female LFPR by age cohort. Dr. Saizi explains that we will be able to see this double peak pattern. For some of the higher income countries in the Asia Pacific region, they do have a double peak pattern which has been shown in some countries in the same region, but this is not happening in Malaysia.

Keynote Session 2 Summary

In Malaysia, she says the female LFPR against the age cohort just shows a very typical single peak. The single peak profile of women's LFPR indicates that upon exit, women will not re-enter the labour force again. This is due to social norms, where the mother has to carry the burden of taking care of the baby and her husband's family would like her to stay longer to take care of the family as well. That is an example of social norms hindering women reentering the workforce, she says.

Women in Malaysia spend more hours than men on unpaid care and domestic work. Micro data from the Malaysian population survey conducted a study on this and the response was that they were taking care of their children and there was objection from their husband. Dr. Saizi shares her recent findings with Malaysian data against comparative studies done in China on the specifics of how social norms are the determinant of women re-entering the labour force. The more children, the lower the probability that the mother will re enter the labour force.

She then refers to China, where they asked "are you agreeable that men have to be the breadwinner and women in the house", female workers have to be laid off first when an economic recession is present during the pandemic period, housework sharing - women have to take care of higher household workloads compared to men. All of these social attitudes contribute significantly to the reasons women don't re-enter the labour force after marriage.

Occupational segregation - there is always a glass ceiling for women to be in the top management of a company and higher positions. Based on the data statistics of the gender requirement report, the percentage of women employed in higher positions such as managers, technicians and professionals, clerical support workers and sales and service workers are significantly lower as compared to men. There's another phenomenon called "sticky floor" where women are forced to take lower paying jobs and non skilled jobs. Social norms within the family and society significantly affect the female LFPR in Malaysia. Dr. Saizi stresses that the percentage of women affected is concerningly significant.

She then shares her solutions - first one being to reduce the gender gap in paid family leave. By 2021 among 114 countries, the global average paternity leave for fathers is 21 days and maternity leave for mothers is 191 days. In 2022, in Malaysia it stands at 7 days and 98 days respectively. Dr. Saizi goes on to discuss the relationship between gender gap and parental leave in different regions. If we are able to narrow the gender gap and parental leave between the husband and the wife, we are able to increase our female LFPR in Malaysia and other countries. She talks about the "missing women" phenomenon in Malaysia and another related and very serious phenomenon "missing children". She added that earlier this year, decline in fertility rates also point to concerns about the future labour force of Malaysia.

Keynote Session 2 Summary

The second solution that Dr. Saizi talks about is shifting norms and behaviour via social media campaigns. She cites a 2020 UNFPA report “How changing social norms is crucial in achieving gender equality”. Research findings based on media experiments from developing countries indicate more gender-equitable behaviour (ie. increased interaction with the opposite sex, sharing household work and mobility for girls) after the media campaign. She stresses that we need more impact analysis on these campaigns to produce more research findings to help the public and private sector in improving social norms to help with the female LFPR in Malaysia. Dr. Saizi talks about how changing social norms is crucial in achieving gender equality.

The third solution she touched on was to give women more financial control via digital accounts, to encourage female entrepreneurship. She goes on to discuss increasing digital literacy in a post pandemic era, motivation for improving women's independent decision making, power over assets and financial resources within the family, and setting up individual bank accounts for women would have benefits for female employment in developing countries.

Dr. Saizi ends the keynote session by sharing her personal story, as she refers to a book gifted by her mother called ‘Leftover Women’ on the resurgence of gender inequality in China which inspired her to pursue her study findings.

Keynote Session 2 Q&A



Independent Journalist Amirul Ruslan posed a question about policy and what the data says about data norms, social norms and how it's looking like for the world and Malaysia - RE: shifting gender norms.



Dr. Saizi responded by noting that during the pandemic we could see two kinds of changes, women were forced to take on more house care and childcare roles, which led to them losing jobs at a higher rate compared to men. Secondly, the rate of domestic violence increased a lot in this period. According to the public source data, 33% of women have experienced domestic violence during the pandemic which means 1 out of 3 women are suffering. She stated she was going through the media coverage on this issue, looking at different policy interventions to further understand the phenomenon in Malaysia.



Keynote Session 2 Q&A

Q

Amirul goes on to ask about her findings in China, are there similar conditions that can describe the findings in both countries.



A

As demonstrated during her keynote session, Dr. Saizi reiterates that regarding the impact of social norms not only in Malaysia but also in China based on literature review - social norms have become one of the biggest determinants in hindering women to not only join the labour force but also removing them from the labour force. The difference would be the policy interventions in different countries.



A

Q

How gender norms can be changed in the workplace for working women to uphold gender equality, in terms of individual initiatives as well as policy, Amirul asked.



A

Dr. Saizi said with the gender responsive budget, Malaysia is planning to implement that from 2023- but there is a need to remain cognisant about the laws and regulations of countries like South Korea. About 141 countries have made this change and in India the regulation and government has said 30% of the allocated budget has to go to women's initiatives and programmes. She touches on maternity leave within the vulnerable groups who are unemployed and not entitled to maternity leave. In France, they take a portion of the government's tax revenue to help women from the poor families and informal sector to provide for them. In India, for those who don't have these benefits, the government is providing USD \$ 1.86 a day as cash assistance so women do not worry about the cost of maternity leave. Another necessity she touched on is healthcare for women during their maternity leave. Their government provides USD \$100 for women if needed for care or health check ups during that period. These are examples we can learn from in Malaysia.



A

Keynote Session 2 Q&A

Q

Tyra from the floor asked a question on enforcing gender norms - how do we challenge the feminisation of women in the labour force even though they try to gravitate to that. We would like to see more women break the ceiling and how can we not only increase the women labour force itself but to make way for feminisation of women in the labour force itself.



Dr. Saizi responded saying Malaysia is making some effort trying to reach the 30% target which means the board members in bigger companies have to be women, which has been done in developed countries. The government is trying to engage through Bursa Malaysia to provide some skilled training to the programme from women who are qualified to be board members on the listed companies - not just to fill up the quota but to let those stakeholders know they are qualified for the roles they take up. In terms of education, for example, Malaysian girls who are great at Math do not think they can hold certain positions associating them to be 'male dominant' jobs. To address this, Dr. Saizi said it requires reform in the education system.

A

Plenary Session 2

From Gaps to Opportunity - The Burden of Unpaid Care-work and The Transformation to The Care Economy

Unpaid care is cited as the most frequent impediment to women's economic potential & development. With responsibilities including housework, child care, elderly care and others generally falling to women - this limits the number of hours, headspace and capability of women to balance care work and economic activity (especially for female headed households).

How can social, infrastructural, financial and legislative tools be optimised to alleviate unpaid care work? Having established that there is a huge demand for care work - how do we change the narrative from care work to the care economy and what needs to be done?

Moderator



**Associate Professor
Dr. Sharifah
Syahirah S. Sheikh**

Senior Lecturer (Kolej Universiti
Poly-Tech MARA (KUPTM))

Panelist #1



**Yang Berhormat
Rodziah Ismail**

Member of Parliament,
Ampang

Panelist #2



**Sumitra
Visvanathan**

Executive Director,
Women's Aid
Organisation

Panelist #3



**Professor Dr
Shanthi Thambiah**

Gender Studies
Program, Universiti
Malaya

Panelist #4



Tashy Sukumaran

Senior Analyst, Institute
Of Strategic &
International Studies
(ISIS)

Plenary Session 2

Key Takeaways

1

Care work is essential for the health and wellbeing of a family, society and economy. Such work involves mental and physical effort. Despite this, women are expected to perform such work for free and yet, such care work is usually dismissed as being petty or trivial.

2

Just because women are biologically designed to be able to give birth, gender norms prescribe that childcare is a woman's role and job. But there is nothing about a man's biology that stops them from taking care of children.

3

Women have been socialised to believe and accept that they are responsible for care work. A woman is thus less likely to choose jobs or careers that require long hours. Men rarely have to make this consideration.

4

Unpaid care work is often deemed part of the private realm but in fact, such care work provided by women to the economy is a form of "subsidy".

5

Reducing the burden of unpaid care work on women will have positive ramifications for women, family, society and the country. Unpaid care work should be shared among men and other family members to free women to pursue their goals and participate in the labour force.

6

Adopting a gender lens is important when designing government budgets and policies. Start by recognising the inequalities faced by women and men in society, and then work to address these inequalities. Such a lens should also be based on the lived realities of women and men.

7

One way to encourage women in B40 communities to gain more financial power and independence is to provide access to affordable and safe childcare in the community.

8

Welfare departments need more funding and staff so that state-level offices have sufficient personnel to deal with cases concerning children.

9

The effects of unpaid care work are multiplied by other crises like the climate crisis. These affect women's opportunities for paid work, political participation, education and leisure.

10

The goal of addressing the burden of unpaid care work on women is not to push all women into the labour force but provide them with real freedom to choose.

YB Rodziah Ismail

Member of Parliament, Ampang

“The current Selangor government had markedly raised the budget allocated to portfolio issues under the executive councillor for women from RM100,000 to RM 128 million.”

Speaking from her experience as a seasoned Selangor assemblyperson and newly elected Member of Parliament, Rodziah Ismail said conversations about gender and gender disparity rarely involved politicians and policymakers.

She cited how the current Selangor government had markedly raised the budget allocated to portfolio issues under the executive councillor for women from RM100,000 to RM 128 million. It also invested some RM8 million into Institut Wanita Berdaya (IWB), a think tank focused on formulating women-centric initiatives and policies in the state.

Rodziah added that the Selangor government had helped women during the Covid-19 pandemic by providing cash transfers, policies supporting home-based entrepreneurship, policies supporting small-scale businesses as well as policies supporting working from home arrangements. She opined that working from home infrastructure should be improved and maintained, even as Malaysia and the economy emerges from the pandemic. She thus hoped that the federal government would emulate these Selangor government initiatives.

Next, she recalled how the Selangor government had proposed the i-Suri and i-Saraan social protection schemes to former Women, Children and Community Development minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail. Rodziah said these schemes provided some financial security for housewives, who often did not have any income despite working 24 hours a day.

A pension scheme under the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) for housewives, i-Suri allows housewives and their spouses to make voluntary monthly contributions. The government provides each account RM480 per year.

Also an EPF voluntary contribution scheme, i-Saraan allows individuals who are self-employed and receive irregular income to contribute to their pension. The government provides each account an additional 15 percent of the total contribution, capped at RM250 per year.

In her experience, Rodziah said state-level Welfare Departments (Jabatan Kebajikan) only had a “unit” comprising “two or three” officers handling cases concerning children in the entire state. As opposed to a well-equipped or well-staffed department.

Thus, she called for more money to be allocated to the Welfare Department. She also proposed that a separate Department of Children be established and wanted the Children’s Commission to be empowered with more staff. She further called for a parliamentary select committee to mirror each and every ministry, to hold them accountable.

Sumitra Visvanathan

Executive Director, Women's Aid Organisation

“

It is important to base these decisions and methods on the lived realities of women. By talking to women about their lives and priorities, one could gather gender-disaggregated data.

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Women's Aid Organisation executive director Sumitra Visvanathan spoke at length on gender-responsive budgeting - whereby government budget and policy decisions are made with the goal of ending gender inequality and gender discrimination. This includes how much money is allocated to certain agencies and programmes.

To perform such budgeting, one needs to adopt a gender lens - recognising the inequalities and different experiences faced by women and men in society. One must also recognise what barriers stand in the way of ending gender inequality and discrimination.

Sumitra said it was important to base these decisions and methods on the lived realities of women. By talking to women about their lives and priorities, one could gather gender-disaggregated data.

With unpaid care work, she said solutions are needed to help end this gender inequality. This must include a comprehensive economic policy that takes into account the lived realities of women.

Gender-responsive budgeting could also be implemented when trying to improve childcare. Sumitra shared that her organisation - the Women's Aid Organisation - had been appealing to the federal government for “affordable childcare in the community” for the past 20 years but said existing interventions were not good enough. In Selangor, however, she lauded a childcare programme that employed women from B40 communities as childcare providers.

She stressed a change in attitudes was important to improve how the government made decisions and policies on childcare. For example, parental leave should be shared between mother and father. Malaysia currently mandates 21 days of maternal leave and just seven days of paternal leave. By changing this law to ensure equal sharing of parental leave, Sumitra said children's perception of gender roles will shift as they experience fathers who are just as invested in childcare as mothers.

She closed by emphasising that attitudinal change among those implementing policies and benefitting from policies was very important.



Professor Dr Shanthi Thambiah

Gender Studies Program, Universiti Malaya

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Women have been socialised to believe and accept that they are responsible for care work. By having this additional burden, a woman is less likely to choose jobs or careers that require long hours, which is a consideration men are much less likely to have to make.

Speaking on the politics of unpaid care work, Gender Studies professor Shanthi Thambiah said that such work was often undervalued, poorly understood and not given priority simply because it is typically done by women.

It is termed “work” because such endeavours involve mental and physical effort. Like how caring for an elderly person can be physically taxing, time-consuming and mentally draining.

The word “care” points to how such work is necessary for the health and wellbeing of a family and society. Despite all these realities, people - often women - are rarely remunerated for doing such work.

Professor Shanthi emphasised that such work was usually dismissed as being petty or trivial when in reality, a well-functioning society and economy completely depended on unpaid care work. She analysed that the problem was less about the work itself but how women, not men, are expected to perform it for free. This inequality has turned such care work into a burden imposed upon women.

Gender norms in society prescribe a set of behaviours, choices and expectations upon women. Just because women are biologically designed to be able to give birth, society assumes that childcare is a woman’s role and job. When, in fact, there is nothing in male biology that prohibits them from taking care of children.

Elaborating, Professor Shanthi analysed that women have been socialised to believe and accept that they are responsible for care work.

By having this additional burden, a woman is less likely to choose jobs or careers that require long hours, which is a consideration men are much less likely to have to make.

As a result, she limits her job and career choices. She may compromise and choose a job that is below her skillset and qualifications just so she can perform unpaid care work. She may even drop out of the labour force to attend to unpaid care work.

In an environment where a gender wage gap exists, she is further undervalued. With less earning power, this reduces her long-term financial wellbeing, retirement security and ability to afford healthcare. This, said Professor Shanthi, was ultimately what keeps the female LFPR low.

Thus, reducing the burden of unpaid care work on women will have positive ramifications for women, family, society and the country. Unpaid care work should be shared among men and other family members to free women to pursue their goals and participate in the labour force.

Asked to provide recommendations on how to address the issue of unpaid care work, Professor Shanthi said it was important to get politicians and policymakers to publicly admit that equality is important. They must then commit to addressing gender inequality. Lawmakers ought to be consistent - not hypocritical - when it comes to addressing inequality, especially since Malaysia is accountable internationally on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). She argued that groups working in related fields must try convincing politicians and policymakers that addressing inequality will benefit families, the society and the country.

Her second recommendation was to un-stereotype care work by shattering the notion that only women are responsible for such work. She also argued that there is a need to challenge this notion that childcare and elder care was the responsibility of private citizens, especially women. This notion that such care belonged in the private realm is why so many households are reliant on domestic workers. Professor Shanthi argued that such care was, in fact, provided by women to the economy as a form of “subsidy”. Thus, there is a need to encourage men and women to equally share the burden of care. She contended that countries that have managed to un-stereotype care work have seen citizens’ quality of life improve and marriages stabilise.

Professor Shanthi’s third recommendation was for the government to invest in “care infrastructure”. She then likened care infrastructure to the railway infrastructure project East Coast Railway Link (ECRL). The government is investing billions in the ECRL project to transport people, create jobs and improve the economy. Investing in care infrastructure will have similar positive effects, as it will enable women (who were previously unable to work due to care commitments) to enter the labour force. She then cited a 2014 survey by the Ministry of Women, Children and Community along with the UN Development Programme where women said they would not drop out of the labour force if only better childcare was available.

Thus, Professor Shanthi urged the government to regard spending on care as an investment into the economy, not merely a cost. This will especially help women from B40 backgrounds, who are often unable to afford employing a domestic worker to help with care. Such women will only go to work if they know their children are safe, getting an education and learning social skills.

To close, she stated the 5Rs of unpaid care work - recognising it, reducing it, redistributing it, representing it and rewarding such work. Unless unpaid care work is addressed, she cautioned that Malaysian society may not be able to weather another pandemic as it will be plunged in a situation of “care deficit”.

Tashny Sukumaran

Senior Analyst, Institute Of Strategic & International Studies (ISIS)

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Women felt that they needed to take on a “second shift” after work due to a lack of effective childcare, being far away from the childcare centre and the cost of such services.

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Public policy analyst Tashny Sukumaran shared that the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) was studying early childcare and education services. They found that women felt that they needed to take on a “second shift” after work due to a lack of effective childcare, being far away from the childcare centre and the cost of such services. For example, some women could not get to work on time after sending their children to the childcare centre.

The next stage of the study will look at the household salary scales in relation to whether families can afford childcare services. She shared that unpaid care work tended to cut across ethnicities due to cultural expectations in Malaysia and in the region.

Tashny also hoped to study domestic workers in Malaysia, many of which are women. Specifically, how they leave their families at home and travel abroad for work, opening themselves up to abuse. Under a “fictive kin” relationship, they are employed to care for families and children but leave their own families and children in the care of others. Care of their own families is often “transferred” to their mothers, mothers-in-law or eldest daughters, perpetuating what Tashny termed a “chain of care” where women are trapped in care work.

Next, Tashny said that the crisis of unpaid care work was worsened by other crises like the climate crisis, where women are often tasked with dangerous jobs like collecting fuel and water. This, she said, affected women’s opportunities for paid work, political participation, education and play.

Along with a new Gender Equality Bill, she wanted the government to amend the Child Care Centre Act 1984 to be more detailed in requiring centres to teach children how to read and write. She hoped that the government would provide households with childcare incentives like tax exemptions for nursery fees.

She also proposed that the Employment Act 1955 be amended to protect domestic workers.

Plenary Session 2 Q&A



Rita from the audience believed that the value of unpaid care work could be computed by comparing it against how much one would typically pay for a live-in nurse and domestic worker. These values ought to be taken into account when calculating how much women contribute to the national gross domestic product (GDP). This would also help calculate how much women are “subsidising” the government by performing unpaid care work.

Rita also proposed that the labour force participation rate be re-defined to take into account women engaging in unpaid care work and unpaid domestic work. This is because the term was possibly defined by men a long time ago.



Next, Tyra from the audience opined that a key structural flaw of capitalism was it assigned economic values based on whether an activity was performed in a private or public space.

For example, one was expected to pay for food and childcare in public but not when it was provided in private spaces like the home. This, she said, showed how capitalism tends to commodify women’s bodies but not women’s work.

Tashny Sukumaran agreed with Tyra and highlighted how the goal was not to push all women into the workforce, but to provide them with real freedom to choose.

Keynote Session 3



Understanding the multi-dimensional poverty of economically marginalised women and establishing key life-cycle interventions.

In Malaysia's quest to leave no one behind, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated socio-economic gaps. Especially when it comes to the economically marginalised women & girls in both rural and urban landscapes.

It's vital to firstly understand the causality factors (both socially & economically) and why they perpetuate. An examination of the current infrastructures set in place and understanding gaps and strategically understanding where key interventions are needed.

Moderator



Yiswaree Palansamy

Senior Correspondent, Malay Mail

Speaker



Rashaad Ali

Chief Strategy & Operations Officer, Social & Economic Research Initiative (SERI)

Keynote Session 3

Key Takeaways

1

MPI* allows us to capture deprivations at multiple levels such as access to healthcare, education, transportation and basic amenities - food, electricity, housing and water.

2

MPI which was in the 11th Malaysian Plan becomes all the more important and pertinent when we think about policies and programmes to alleviate poverty. It has superseded traditional measurement based on income.

3

The number of poor households we have are far more extensive than what existing poverty measures suggest. Employment opportunities through poverty programmes yield different results between males and females in the households.

4

Earlier in 2022, the Malaysian government said they would revise the poverty line data, which would be accessible in 2023.

5

A study on EPF retirees found that women are more adversely affected than men in areas such as transportation, income and home ownership.

6

The average education of single mothers in average households is lower than the schooling level. Women earn an average household income of RM1,400 as opposed to RM2,100.

7

A study conducted by SERI in 2021 found that women had less long term savings than men and tended to rely on their children for financial support. This is in relation to the economic situation of the pandemic.

8

In December 2022, the new Health Minister Dr. Zaliha Mustafa announced the ministry will make period poverty a priority with the distribution of sanitary products in the ministry offices and then hopefully extending to other offices afterwards. This allows us to understand what that lack of access translates to and to focus on larger issues like sanitation and women's healthcare issues.

9

Policymaking needs to catch up with NGOs, civil society groups and academicians. Gender responsive budgeting is another tool we can use to look into this matter.

10

With MPI there is more access to data and being able to use that to craft policymaking actions. Key things we need to think about - reducing barriers to aid, reducing strict eligibility criteria that aid assistance programs, solving literacy issues, and reducing the travel requirements.

*MPI (multidimensional poverty index) is a measurement to better track and understand poverty

Keynote Session 3 Summary

Rashaad starts off by breaking the misconception of poverty. The misunderstanding of what makes people poor creates ineffective policy. “If we think of poverty in binary terms such as lack of money or a lack of income then our solutions will reflect that thinking, very reductive, simplistic thinking”. He goes on to say that it illustrates our lack of nuance when we think of poverty whether we realise it or not. And this sort of thinking is reflected in attitudes when people talk about cash handouts, there’s a sort of aversion towards cash assistance. Rashaad defines MPI as a multi dimensional poverty index developed in 2007 - stating it as a measurement to better track and understand poverty.

MPI asks a simple question - so what actually makes somebody poor? Rashaad explains that it allows us to capture deprivations at multiple levels such as access to healthcare, education, transportation, basic amenities such as food, electricity, housing and water.

Therefore MPI becomes all the more important and pertinent when we think about policies and programmes to alleviate poverty. MPI in Malaysia was in the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016 - 2020), it has superseded traditional measurement based on income. In 2019, a UN report said the official poverty rate was 0.04% in the world, which is unrealistically low. He goes on to say the Economic Affairs Minister at the time, Azmin Ali rebuked the report. The government then said actually, maybe.. That government promised to revive the poverty line which was at 980, a 15 year old poverty line they promised to revise but it wasn’t revised until the next administration came into power.

He goes on to talk about a prominent study by Professor Dr. Fatimah Kari from University Malaya in Sarawak, on Terengganu and Orang Asli settlements. Her studies have revealed that the number of poor households we have are far more extensive than what existing poverty measures suggest because she’s capturing a broader base. She has discovered things like employment opportunities through poverty programmes yield different results between males and females in the households.

Rashaad said earlier this year the government said they would revise the poverty line data, which would be accessible in 2023. A study on EPF retirees found that women are more adversely affected than men in areas such as transportation, income and home ownership. A Permatang Pauh study by the aforementioned Professor suggested that heads of households have a higher depreciation score than their male counterparts in every dimension related to home and teaching, learning, job loss by the pandemic. Average education of single mothers in average households is lower than the schooling level. Women earn an average household income of RM1,400 as opposed to RM2,100. Rashaad explains the study conducted by SERI in 2021 found that women had less long term savings than men and tended to rely on their children for financial support. This is in relation to the economic situation of the pandemic.

A lack of acknowledgment of all these different vulnerable groups leads to economic exclusion. We have this economic bias, that is kind of built in and as a result of this we have a lack of social protection for these groups. Our general approach is very broad based, it could do with a bit more nuance and targeting, Rashaad said.

He added that earlier in the week the new Health Minister Dr. Zaliha Mustafa announced the ministry will make period poverty a priority with the distribution of sanitary products in the ministry offices and then hopefully extending to other offices afterwards. In November 2022, the Selangor state announced a similar period poverty programme of awareness. It allows us to understand what that lack of access translates to and to focus on larger issues like sanitation and women's healthcare issues.

As a case in point, Rashaad discusses key intervention themes. Policymaking needs to catch up with NGOs, civil society groups and academicians. MPI has been around since 2016 but you don't see this nuance applied anywhere, he said. A lot of social welfare programmes take the usual forms such as cash assistance, subsidy programmes, which is great but there is a lack of agility and robustness received to be transformative policies, to aid people in need. Gender responsive budgeting is another tool we can use to look into this matter. How has the money been used in the past, is it being spent well? What is the KPI? We have a lot of entrepreneurship programs for single mothers which is great but is there a mismatch between the entrepreneurship programs and what's done under the ground, Rashaad emphasised. It's more suited for a local and state government level as opposed to a macro national approach.

Rashaad also touched on cultural barriers. Practices and policies that should be in place especially after the pandemic. "We have chosen to revert to the norm instead of pushing the opportunity to transform how we approach society. We often retreat to the old ways of doing things, perhaps this is something within ourselves, a cultural barrier that prevents us from reframing the entire issue."

Policymaking should be objective. With MPI there is more access to data and being able to use that to craft actions. Rashaad believes it's about understanding the myriad factors of deprivation. With that assistance, it should treat people that are more vulnerable better and with respect. This is universally applicable but more so for women. There are key things we need to think about, reducing barriers to aid, reducing strict eligibility criteria that aid assistance programs, solving literacy issues, and reducing the travel requirements. It comes to a point where assistance becomes too high and it's counter intuitive.

Rashaad wraps up the MPI with the need for nuance, the need to employ a little bit of compassion, and the need for more critical analysis to examine not just our attitude towards poverty but our attitude towards social assistance. [Poverty] is not anything that anybody should be punished for as often it's beyond their control.

Keynote Session 3 Q&A

Q

Malay Mail Senior Correspondent Yiswaree Palansamy joins Rashaad and talks about how socioeconomic gaps in Malaysia started widening after the pandemic, especially with marginalised women and girls in urban and rural areas. Before diving in, Yiswaree pointed out a few notable questions that we need to reflect on, one of them being are we just more focused on the facade than what's under the ground? She said we need to address the current social infrastructure, understand the gaps and strategies for interventions - all of which can and will expand women's rights through economic equity.

She brought up an article by Calvin Cheng, a senior analyst at Institute Strategic of International Studies (ISIS), which discussed women and girls who have borne the brunt of the covid repercussions, they have made up nearly two out of three of the employment declines, stating it's at a critical stage.



Rashaad takes the floor to answer Yiswaree on Malaysia's stance with this. From six years ago, using income to then incorporating MPI to measure this. No government wants to admit that they are presiding over such a situation. He says it's an issue of data transparency. There have been a lot of calls for the new government to make this accessible to the public. The government is typically guarded. Reiterates his hope of an initiative that would bring the information to be forward in March 2023, it will be good for stakeholders to engage people who have done the work from the grassroots levels when that is in motion. More data availability will allow for the government to engage with public and civil society.

A

Q

Yiswaree asks how gender has been sidelined in efforts to address poverty in Malaysia



Rashaad said that when it comes to gender issues, it feels like an afterthought. It is not something that is mainstreamed. The lack of that as far as policy is concerned is what hinders it.

A



She then follows up by asking when can we expect empathetic change within the unity government



Realistically- we need to temper our expectations of the unity government, said Rashaad. It is uncharted territory and day by day it seems like something new and not very exciting is going to happen. The government has a significant challenge on running on a day to day basis. He reiterates his point on data transparency.



Yiswaree goes on to talk about the government's initiative to give out RM480 per annum for these women and asks Rashaad his thoughts on it. Can it be effective with the level of poverty faced by women and girls today? Is the amount sufficient?



The policy is a great idea but it is not enough. According to Rashaad, in the last couple of years the government has allowed people to take money out of their EPF. He thinks any opportunity to put money back there will be good or else we are going to face a retirement crisis not too far down the road. It's got to be complemented by other policies that were mentioned earlier on.



Kimberly, who was representing the deaf community, asked a question when we do this data collection or general survey on the population - does that also include persons with disability or deaf people like myself because I am a woman first and a citizen of Malaysia. So where is the inclusivity in all the data collection?



Rashaad said that's what MPI should be able to capture and should be able to account for all of these factors, if it is not incorporated it is something that can be done within the mechanisms of MPI and at this point it is kind of hidden hope that the government is taking this into account and hopefully we will find out in a couple of months time.





Yiswaree then goes on to ask how big the disabled community is and has SERI done any work on that. There is a lack of data and something we should be working towards.



Rashaad said how can we take the time to balance our existing measures of poverty distributed to the segments who need it. Refers to during the height of the pandemic the speed in which things were done showed enough. There is only so much we can blame bureaucracy. There is this lack of agility in terms of policy making within the government on initiative and action.



Final question by Yiswaree based on a UNHDP report that said the richest 10% in Malaysia hold the 38.4% income of Malaysia as compared to the poorest 10% who only control 1.7%. When we talk about policymaking, how will this distort or be reflective of the actual problem on the ground when we have such a big disparity in terms of who takes a bigger or smaller share of our economy? Will this also distort the views of our lawmakers when we formulate policies which will be reflective of what's on the ground?



We have to be able to treat and engage with the issue to question where that attitude comes from, Rashaad said, instead of allowing whatever biases that we have to come forward. This disparity creates a relation problem when it comes to policy making. MPI programs allow for this to happen.



Plenary Session 3

Levelling the Playing field - The Social & Youth Narrative

This panel outlines key questions, perspectives and solutions on factors impacting women's economic and developmental potential including the importance of women's political participation in policymaking.

What are the expectations of our youth when it comes to entering the workplace - especially when it comes to gender? What's the role of the mass media in establishing the equality narrative? What is the role of the private & public sector in ensuring that opportunities and access for women, including disabled women- remain equitable? When it comes to access to education or specialising in non-traditional subjects how are girls treated differently and how do we overcome this?

Moderator



Ushar Daniele

Independent Broadcast
Journalist

Panelist #2



Suraya Zainuddin

Financial Blogger

Panelist #3



**Nisshanthan
Dhanapalan**

Communications
Consultant

Panelist #1



**Yang Berhormat
Lim Yi Wei**

Kampung Tunku
Assemblyperson, DAP
Women Selangor
Organising Secretary,
DAPSY Damansara Chief

Panelist #4



Sazriena Razali

Student & Head of
Bureau for Culture &
Activity Persatuan
Mahasiswa Orang Asli
(PMOA)

Panelist #5



**Miza Marsya
Roslan**

Persons with Disabilities
(PWD) Youth Advocate,
Assistant Secretary of
Spinal Muscular Atrophy
Malaysia (SMAM)

Plenary Session 3

Key Takeaways

1

One way to make schools more inclusive is to not segregate students with disabilities during academic classes, co-curricular activities or recess periods. This helps normalise having persons with disabilities in society, and teaches all about what needs such persons have.

2

When employing persons with disabilities, their identity should not be penalised. Instead, their input should be appreciated and acted upon to make spaces more inclusive.

3

There is a continued need to convince Orang Asli parents and children about the importance of further education so that less from the community drop out from school, and more will pursue tertiary study.

4

Child marriage among Orang Asli youth, especially girls, remains a reason why they stop school to perform unpaid care work instead of pursuing an education and career.

5

Social media remains a risky space for women as they are exposed to harassment and bullying when wanting to express themselves and have their voice heard. One result of this is women tend to be less willing to ask for financial help online due to a fear of retaliation.

6

Shattering gender roles and gender norms begins by challenging cultural and social expectations in the home.

7

When discussing personal finance, practices like cooking meals at home and thrifting clothes are sometimes dismissed as lifestyle choices or women's issues rather than solutions for better personal finance.

8

There is a gender wage gap in Malaysia where men can earn up to 10 percent more than women. It does not help that culturally, women tend to be penalised for seeming too "ambitious" when they are assertive in requesting for salary increases.

9

Political parties are the primary gatekeepers of female political participation and yet there is no requirement for them to include a minimum number of women in decision-making bodies or when deciding election candidates.

10

Appointing women to "non-traditional" leadership roles will help shatter stereotypes surrounding what roles women are more suited for compared to men.

YB Lim Yi Wei

Kampung Tunku Assemblyperson, DAP Women Selangor Organising Secretary, DAPSY Damansara Chief

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Women deserve the same space as men in areas like science, finance and sports.

Accordingly, they should expect the same level of judgement and accountability.

”



Speaking from her experience as a lawmaker, Yang Berhormat Lim Yi Wei said that female politicians tend to face public scrutiny for what they wear and how they present themselves. Depending on which sectors of society it comes from, such scrutiny may respond differently to whether the female politician wears a skirt or otherwise; and whether she speaks in an assertive or gentle manner.

She shared that she grew up in a fairly gender-neutral household but did not escape from gender biases, even from herself. In one instance, she caught herself telling her brother she was a “better son than him” during an argument, and realised she was perpetuating the gender stereotype that sons were expected to be better than daughters.

In her party - the Democratic Action Party (DAP) - Lim said that the 30% women quota was in practice in decision-making structures like the Central Executive Committee (CEC). She viewed the 30% quota more as a target than a ceiling, and believed that setting such targets was a useful way to chip away at the patriarchal status quo.

As for what barriers need to be removed to enable more women to participate in politics, she shared that social and cultural expectations of women needed to change. Expectations that women should stay at home to perform care work need to change, so that both men and women have equal responsibilities for housework and care work.

Calling political parties the “primary gatekeepers” of women’s participation in politics, she urged parties to institute “women-friendly” policies and practices. For example, taking into account women’s responsibilities and schedules when setting meeting times. Another way is to provide childcare during political party meetings so women can bring their children along.

Barriers preventing indigenous women, women with disabilities and women with mental health issues from entering politics also needed to be removed. Lim noted that men and women with mental health issues were often described differently in the media. For example, a man may be described as being “disturbed” while a woman would be deemed “hysterical” or “out of control”.

Asked about whether female politicians leading “non-traditional” portfolios made any difference, Lim opined that they serve as important role models to shatter stereotypes about what roles women were suited for. She said women deserve the same space as men in areas like science, finance and sports. Accordingly, they should expect the same level of judgement and accountability.

Women also bring in different perspectives into these areas and ministries, she said. Like how some laws disproportionately affect women, and how climate change disproportionately affects indigenous women.

Despite being home to many accomplished sportswomen, Lim noted that they were neglected. The value of women’s sports were deemed lower than men’s sports, and sexual harassment remains a persistent issue.

Asked which ministerial position she was interested in, Lim said she was interested in the Home Affairs Ministry as she believed it needed much reform and decentralisation. The Ministry encompasses many important agencies like the police, immigration department and drug rehabilitation. Shortcomings within these agencies often affect women, she said, like when women want to report domestic violence but are not given privacy. Or when women with foreign spouses are unable to pass on their citizenship rights to children born abroad.

Suraya Zainuddin

Financial Blogger

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Suraya challenged the notion that personal finance was a “male-dominated field”, pointing out that practices like cooking and thrifting were often dismissed as “lifestyle” choices rather than helpful habits for better personal finance.

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In her job as a blogger writing online about personal finance, Suraya Zainuddin shared that her experience has been overwhelmingly positive. She especially appreciated social media platforms like Twitter that allow users to curate their audience by muting and blocking other people.

She challenged the notion that personal finance was a “male-dominated field”, pointing out that practices like cooking and thrifting were often dismissed as “lifestyle” choices rather than helpful habits for better personal finance.

She reflected on how her own audience was evenly split between women and men. Which presented her with varied responses when she discussed topics like how women can request to amend “taklik” (a Muslim marriage agreement between couples) templates to bar the husband-to-be from taking a second wife or require him to share the burden of household chores. Her intention was to show women how to protect themselves financially, but she was accused by some of not trusting or loving her own husband.

Similarly, she noticed that some women responded defensively when she pointed out how current patriarchal systems did not benefit women. Like when she criticised a common system in the Malay-Muslim household whereby earning an income and managing finances is deemed the responsibility of a father or husband while women stay at home. Suraya shared that some women disagreed when she challenged this “ideal” structure with accounts of abandoned elderly parents and single mothers, as they believed that these cases happened to others but not them.

Responding to a comment that some women find themselves in trouble after leaving all their finances to their husbands to the point of not having a bank account, Suraya said it did not help that women tend to be less willing to ask for help online due to a fear of retaliation. One way some got around this was to post comments or questions online anonymously.

As for the gender wage gap in Malaysia, Suraya cited Department of Statistics Malaysia data that showed that women earn 5 to 10 percent less. In 2021, the mean salary for men was RM3,085 while mean salary for women was RM2,965. The median salary for men was RM2,315 while the median salary for women was RM2,145.

Suraya believed that the gender wage gap in some industries was higher than what the data showed. She shared an example of how a radio station had tried to justify why it paid their female radio announcer three times less than her male co-host. In work settings, she said men get approved more when they apply for salary raises whereas women are penalised for seeming too “ambitious” when they do the same. Instances like these were what pushed women to seek employment abroad or to leave the workforce entirely, she cautioned.

Comparing the female labour force participation rate with neighbouring nations, Malaysia’s was lower (55.5 percent) than Singapore (69.7 percent) and Thailand (66.8 percent). In comparison, the male labour force participation rate in Malaysia was 80.9 percent. Suraya attributed this to what she called the “caregiver penalty”, where women leave their jobs to take care of children or the elderly. She thus proposed that Malaysia overhaul its caregiving system to relieve women of the “burger” problem of having to care for children as well as elderly parents.

One silver lining that came out of the Covid-19 pandemic was how remote and gig work had become more commonplace, Suraya noted. She hoped this would enable more women to earn an income through less restrictive and less demanding side hustles.

Nisshanthan Dhanapalan

Communications Consultant

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He also noticed that media attitudes towards gender equality tended to differ depending on whether media outlets were independently owned or owned by government-linked companies (GLCs).

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With high internet penetration at almost equal degrees between genders, communications consultant Nisshanthan Dhanapalan noted that the internet has shaped gender relations.

Citing a KRYSS Network study by Serene Lim, he said that social media is not a neutral space but designed to invite participation while also operating on algorithms that decide who gets heard or otherwise. Such spaces may strive to be safe and constructive but he was unsure if they enshrined human rights.

Asked about what women face online, he again cited the KRYSS Network report that said some women posted via a private social media account or decided not to post anything at all just to avoid online harassment or criticism.

Speaking about his own experiences, Nisshanthan shared that he did not have any sisters and his mother taught him how to bake when he was growing up. Even so, his mother once remarked that she had no daughters to impart her baking skills to. His father, meanwhile, was not raised to perform any household chores partly due to suffering from asthmatic issues.

To him, this showed that gender norms were being shed but not quickly enough. He believed that mothers played a key role in shattering these norms in their children, but was concerned how different social classes were approaching gender neutral practices.

Asked about how Malaysian media promotes gender equality or otherwise, Nisshanthan noticed that media coverage of female ministers had improved since after the 14th General Election when more women assumed non-traditional portfolios.

He also noticed that media attitudes towards gender equality tended to differ depending on whether media outlets were independently owned or owned by government-linked companies (GLCs). Attitudes differed as well depending on what language the media outlet was published or broadcasted in. He said that English, Mandarin and Tamil-language media tended to be more progressive whereas Malay-language media tended to be more conservative.

As for harmful speech online, Nisshanthan cited the lawsuit between the government and independent media outlet Malaysiakini that set a precedent where media outlets were now liable for what was posted by others on their comment sections.

As the government works with social media platforms like TikTok to curb hate speech, he wondered why gender-based violence online and cyberbullying were not similarly deemed threats to national security.

Nisshanthan hoped that government agencies would do more to address hate speech and misinformation found on online spaces. He also hoped that media outlets would cover gender, disability issues and even climate disasters through an intersectional lens.

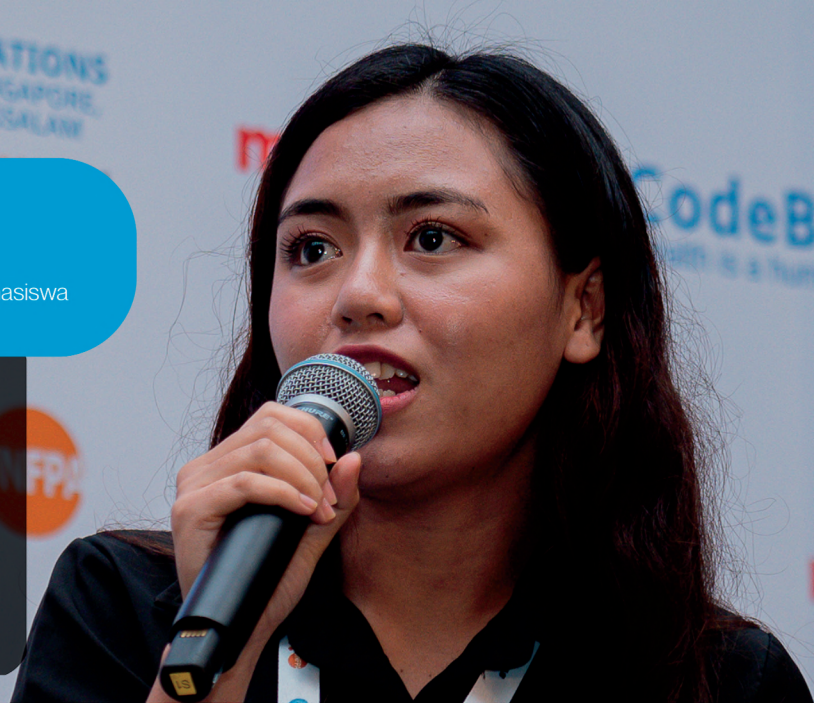
Sazriena Razali

Student & Head of Bureau for Culture & Activity Persatuan Mahasiswa Orang Asli (PMOA)

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Some chose to quit school to get married, a phenomena Sazriena witnessed in her own village. Girls who got married at a young age often found it hard to leave home to get a job because they were tasked with caring for their families.

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As a leader in the Orang Asli Student Association, Sazriena Razali said she often gets to speak with Orang Asli youth.

From those conversations, she found that those who quit school often did so because they did not regard education as important. Some were influenced by their peers to drop out while others preferred working to help ease financial pressure. Some chose to remain in their village where they were comfortable rather than leave to pursue further education.

Some chose to quit school to get married, a phenomena Sazriena witnessed in her own village. Girls who got married at a young age often found it hard to leave home to get a job because they were tasked with caring for their families.

She shared that some Orang Asli youth were “malu” (shy) to pursue their talents and gifts. In one instance, a relative was a talented sportsperson but chose not to develop their potential further. Such attitudes were also perhaps influenced by poor infrastructure in Orang Asli villages. Sazriena said that some students felt discouraged from continuing with their studies because they felt embarrassed for having dirty school uniforms. The reason their uniforms got soiled was because they had to walk long distances on dirt roads to get to school.

In some cases, parents were equally unenthusiastic about tertiary education. Some even stopped their children from continuing their studies, she said.

One way Sazriena was trying to change these attitudes was by teaching at her alma mater and sharing about the importance of education with her students. She believed that holding motivational camps would help show Orang Asli students how to succeed in their studies.

Miza Marsya Roslan

Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Youth Advocate, Assistant Secretary of Spinal Muscular Atrophy Malaysia (SMAM)

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On top of such discrimination, PWD's also faced sexual harassment. Miza said that some regarded female PWD's as “easy targets” who were not able to defend themselves against abuse.

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To Persons with Disabilities youth advocate Miza Marysa Roslan, Malaysia ought to learn from how Indonesia, Singapore and Japan have made public transport and education more accessible to persons with disabilities. In the latest 15th General Election, for example, she shared that some of her fellow PWD's were turned away at voting centres because the buildings were inaccessible to them. Her own experience, however, was smooth.

On top of such discrimination, PWD's also faced sexual harassment. Miza said that some regarded female PWD's as “easy targets” who were not able to defend themselves against abuse.

Asked how education could be made more inclusive, Miza hoped that public schools would allow students with and without disabilities to be in the same academic and co-curricular classes. She also hoped they could share the same recess times.

This, as opposed to how some schools segregated these students, would teach students about the needs of persons with disabilities and help normalise having persons with disabilities in society. Simply having students with disabilities in the same school building but in different classes was not true inclusion, she said.

As for inclusion in workplaces, Miza believed that discriminatory attitudes in society had discouraged some from registering with the Social Welfare Department as persons with disabilities. This is because they feared that being recognised as such would prevent them from securing employment. That is why she believed that PWD's actually made up more than 15 percent of Malaysian society.

Speaking from her own experience of being employed by a social enterprise to help organise inclusive events at Muzium Telekom on weekends, she was glad that her input as a PWD had been taken into account.

As a result, the museum has since added toilets for PWD's, built ramps and is in the process of adding elevators to improve accessibility in the building.

Plenary Session 3 Q&A



A woman from the audience thanked the panellists for reinvigorating her with their words, showing her that the next generation was capable of translating her hopes, dreams and visions into reality. Describing herself as a longtime social activist and law reform advocate, she hoped that they would become role models to prove critics wrong, make workplaces more inclusive by allowing women to bring their children, and shatter stereotypes by changing mindsets at home.



Nurleena from the audience wondered why some Orang Asli parents did not encourage their children to remain at school and what could be done to address such attitudes. To which Orang Asli Students Association leader Sazriena Razali suggested working with teachers to encourage and guide students.

Expanding Women's Rights Through Economic Equity

