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EXPLORING WOMEN'S WORK DECISION IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, the educational level of Malaysian women has increased tremendously with more women than men in the tertiary institutions. Nevertheless, investment in female human capital has not been translated into more women in the workforce. Therefore this study aims to explore the work decision of Malaysian women. Results from the survey of 553 women reveal that nearly all women expressed that they are willing to work after completing their tertiary education but they feel that support and influence from families are the most important deciding factors in influencing women's decision to work. Furthermore, economic and social differences also play vital roles in women's work decision. Women from poorer families and with lower educational background tend to focus on their financial needs as priority in their work decision. On the other hand, women with higher educational background and who come from richer families tend to choose jobs that will allow them to achieve their goals and also bring great self satisfaction. Therefore, various strategies targeting different women need to be done to increase the labour force participation of Malaysian women.

Keywords: *Work Decision, Women Work, Female Labour Force Participation.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia aims to become a developed country by the year 2020 but this may not be possible if only one out of two Malaysian women is in the labour force. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to understand and to explore the work decisions of Malaysian women in order to increase the female labour force participation in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education has long been recognized as an important factor in contributing to the rise in female labour force. Males are no longer the sole bread winner of the family because women also participate in the labour force and complement the household income. Various studies have been carried out which support the theory that female educational attainment increases the probability of female labour force participation (Bbaale & Mpuga, 2011). This implies that measures to educate women beyond secondary school level are needed to increase their labour force participation. Tandrayen-Ragoobur, Ummersinghand Bundhoo (2011) and Contreras and Plaza (2010) also confirmed that the greater a woman's educational level, the greater her participation in the labour force and it was noted that older women participated in the labour force compared to younger women.

It is more challenging for women than men to balance between family and work, thus entry and exit decisions of women are more complex. Hence, many studies have been conducted to investigate and analyze the factors affecting educated women's decision to enter or exit the labour market, either among the new-entrants or those currently working. For example, Ejaz (2007) in his study found that age, educational attainment and marital status have significant and positive effects on female labour force participation. The study concluded that when women belong to a nuclear family and have easy access to transport, they are more likely to participate in economic activities. Also, women who have more children reduce the probability to participate in the labour force. This merely shows that reducing the child care burden of females and facilitating educational attainment would lead to higher female labour force participation rate in the country. The results of Rehman and Roomi (2012) also show that among other motivational drivers

to start and work in their own business among women in Pakistan, the most significant one is achieving work-life balance. Having their own business gives them the flexibility, control and freedom to juggle with their families and social responsibilities. This indicates that the number of children that a woman has is negatively correlated to her decision to participate in the labour force (Conteras & Plaza, 2010).

Studies on the relationship between workplace flexibility and women's labour force participation have also been the area of interest by many researchers for the past decades. Stier (1998) for example, found that women who have just given birth have an increased likelihood of moving from full-time employment to reduced-hour or part-time employment and women in female-type occupations and those working outside core industries are more likely than other women to reduce their work hours or exit the labour force. Women also assess the potential opportunity and direct labour market costs of their exit decisions based on measurable costs and benefits (Hotchkiss, Pitts & Walker, 2008).

Another study by Herr and Wolfram (2012) examined labour force participation rates among married mothers 15 years after they graduated from Harvard University. The results suggest that inflexibility of a woman's work environment plays a causal role in "pushing" her out of the labour force at motherhood and that women who worked in flexible jobs before they had children are 5 to 6 percent more likely to remain working after motherhood suggesting that with improved work-family policies a smaller proportion of women might exit, or "opt out" of the labour force at motherhood. Another study among selected women graduates was carried out by Cabrera (2006) who found that 47 per cent of the women surveyed had stopped working at some point in their career whereby a total of 35 per cent of them cited that bringing up children as their sole reason for opting out and 62 per cent of the women reported that their career focus had changed.

Political measures have also been examined to investigate its influence on women's employment. Undeniably, 'women-friendly' public policies are important and necessary for the more intensive and egalitarian labour market integration of women compared to that of men (Stadelmann-Steffen, 2008). A study on family leave policies and women's job retention after childbirth in three countries, namely the U.S, Britain and Japan found that family

leave coverage increases the likelihood that a woman in all three countries will return to her employment after childbirth, with a particularly marked effect in Japan (Waldfogel, Higuchi & Abe, 1998). The study suggests that the recent expansion in family leave coverage in the three countries is likely to lead to increase in employment of women after childbirth. Kenjoh (2005) also explored the link between family-friendly policies and women's employment after birth of the first child in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Japan in the 1980's and the 1990's. The results indicate that the availability of good-quality part-time employment can provide additional, strong incentives for new mothers to enter active employment. Further studies on women's decision to enter or exit the labour market in Malaysian context are therefore worthwhile.

METHODOLOGY

This paper explores the work decisions of Malaysian women. A total of 600 questionnaires were conveniently distributed to women aged 21 years and above in Malaysia of which a total of 553 completed questionnaire were used in the analysis. Table 1 shows that about two thirds of the respondents are below 30 years old and less than 10 per cent are above 50 years old. In terms of ethnic group, 85 per cent of the respondents are from Bumiputra ethnic group. More than half of the respondents obtained at least a tertiary education. A majority of the respondents are from middle income households which earn at least RM3000 per month. About three quarters of the respondents are currently working and the remaining are either currently not working or have never worked before.

Table 1: Background of Respondents

	Percentage	Number of respondents
Age Group		
24 and below	22.1	122
25 to 30 years old	41.8	231
31 to 40 years old	17.4	96
41 to 50 years old	11.8	65
More than 50 years old	7.1	39
Ethnic Group		
Bumiputra	85.2	471
Non-bumiputra	14.8	82
Highest Education Obtained		
Up to Secondary School	21.2	117
Diploma	25.1	139
Degree	41.8	231
Post graduate	11.9	66
Marital Status		
Ever married	53.7	297
Single – Never married	46.3	256
Total Household Income per Month		
RM 1000 and below	6.3	35
RM 1001 - RM 2000	10.5	58
RM 2001 - RM 3000	16.1	89
RM 3001 - RM 4000	18.4	102
RM 4001 - RM 5000	11.9	66
RM 5001 - RM 7000	12.8	71
RM 7001 - RM 10000	12.1	67
RM 10000 and above	11.8	65
Work Status		
Currently working	74.9	414
Currently not working but have worked before	16.8	91
Never ever worked before	8.7	48
TOTAL	100.0	553

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into three sections in accordance to the work status of the respondents which are the groups of women who are currently working, women who have left the workforce and women who have never worked before. The presentation of details addresses the fundamental issues of reasons and factors for women to consider working. In line with the questions, this study also explores motivators that support women's decision to work and their future plan. The purpose of segregation is to further look into any similarities and differences in responses across the three different work status.

Work Decision of Currently Working Women

Table 2 shows the work decisions of currently working women. The main reason that women choose to work is for personal satisfaction and to achieve economic independence. Only slightly more than a quarter of them are working to support their families. This may reflect that currently working women's work decision is not under the compulsion of financial obligation. However, further bivariate analysis revealed that younger women are more likely to work for personal satisfaction compared to older women whose main reason for working is to support their families.

Furthermore, women with lower educational attainment are one per cent significantly more likely to choose to work to support their families than for personal satisfaction compared to women with higher educational attainment. Likewise, married women are also one per cent significantly more likely to work compared to single women for their families' sake. This is also consistent with household income where women from the lower income group choose to work because of their families' financial needs compared to women from higher income group. Therefore, women from lower income group, with lower education and married women are significantly more likely to work due to the families' financial needs compared to their counterparts. On the contrary, younger women and those from richer families work for their own personal satisfaction or to be economically independent.

Table 2 also shows that the main factor considered by women when choosing a career or a job is the salary and position offered. This is especially true for younger women, non-married women and women from rich families. On the other hand, married women and older women consider 'support from family and husband' as the most important factor when they consider a career or a job.

Nearly half of the working women reported that their parents or their husbands are the key persons who encourage them to work. This indicates that immediate family encouragements may be the key to increase the participation of women in the labour force.

Working women also reported that they will continue to work in the future even if they got married or have their own children. Some one third of them plan to set up their own business and a quarter of them plan to continue to pursue their career advancement. Further analysis revealed that older women are more likely to start their own business in the future compared to younger women. Likewise non-bumiputra women are also more likely to venture into business compared to bumiputra women. It is interesting to note that women with lower educational attainment have higher entrepreneurship spirit compared to women with higher educational background. Furthermore, married women are also one per cent more significant to venture into business compared to single women who prefer to continue working after marriage and even after having their own children in the future.

In conclusion, the majority of the working women choose to work not because of financial needs but more for personal satisfaction and to be economically independent. However, as women start their own families, they are more likely to consider their families' financial needs and their families' commitment when they choose their careers or jobs. Furthermore, most women choose to work as a result of encouragement and support from their immediate families. Working women intend to continue to work and advance in their career even after they have their own families. However, a third of them will seriously consider venturing into business as a way out to fulfill their families and their financial commitments.

Table 2: Work Decisions of Currently Working Women

	Percentage	N
Main Reason for Working		
To Support Family	26.6	110
Economic Independence	31.6	131
Personal Satisfaction	41.8	173
Main Factor when Considering a Career/Job		
Salary and Position	63.0	261
Supports from Family	16.7	69
Others	20.3	84
Who Encouraged Respondents to Work?		
Parents or Husbands	51.7	214
Self and others	48.3	200
Future Plan		
To set up own business	30.4	126
To continue working even after marriage or having children	38.4	159
To advance in career	24.4	101
Others	6.8	28
TOTAL	100	414

Work Decision of Women Currently Not Working

Some 91 respondents are currently not working and have left their work due to various reasons. Table 3 shows the main reasons that they are not working is to further their studies. However, one third of them reported that they left their work to support their families. Younger women are significantly more likely to leave their jobs to pursue their studies especially to obtain tertiary education because higher education will enable them to get a better job with higher pay compared to older women. Table 3 also shows that more than half of the women who are currently not working would return to work if they can find a better career or job offer compared to their previous work. Furthermore, two third of these women themselves choose to leave their job. This may indicate that women who are currently not in

the labour force are discouraged workers. However, nearly four out of five women especially those younger women and higher educated women who are currently not working will be willing to work in the future.

Table 3: Work Decisions of Currently Not Working Women

	Percentage	N
Main Reason for Not Working		
To Support Family	34.1	31
To Further Studies	41.8	38
Others	24.2	22
Main Factor that will Motivate Currently Not Working Women to work		
Facilities that will reduce their family commitments	44.0	40
Better Career or Job offers	56.0	51
Who Discouraged Respondents from Working?		
Parents or Husbands	35.2	32
Self and others	64.8	59
Future Plan		
Will not work	22.0	20
Will go back to work	78.0	71
TOTAL	100	91

Work Decision of Women Who Have Never Worked Before

Only a small percentage of the total respondents have never worked before (9 per cent) because they choose to further their studies or to support their families. Women from lower income families, from older age group and who are currently married are significantly more likely to stay out of the labour force due to families' commitment compared to their counterpart. On the other hand, women from richer families, from the younger age group and currently not married are more likely to stay out of labour force to pursue their studies.

These women are more than willing to enter the labour market if they have facilities or technology that will assist in their families' commitment such as facilities to care for their children or elderly at home. Furthermore, the key persons that discouraged them from working are immediate members of their respective families. Nevertheless, nearly all of them indicated that they will be willing to work in the future.

Table 4: Work Decisions of Women Who Have Never Worked Before

	Percentage	N
Main Reason for Not Working		
To Support Family	39.6	19
To Further Studies	45.8	22
Others	14.6	7
Main Factor That Will Motivate Currently Not working Women to work		
Facilities that will reduce their family commitments	62.5	30
Better Career or Job offers	37.5	18
Who Discouraged Respondents from Working?		
Parents or Husbands	60.4	19
Self and others	39.6	29
Future Plan		
Will not work	6.3	3
Will go back to work	45	93.8
TOTAL	100	48

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore the reasons for women to work or not to work. Interestingly, comparative analysis across the three groups shows some degree of considerations in the women's decisions to work. The responses of the two groups of women who have never worked and are currently not working on their future plan shows more than half of the groups are interested to go back to work. Similarly, the two groups shared the same reasons for not working because of the 'intention to pursue studies'. They may decide

to work only if facilities that will reduce their family commitments are provided. While women who are currently not working will be discouraged by their own preferences, the group who has never worked before are mainly discouraged by their respective parents' and husband's preferences. In contrast, for the group of currently working women who made the majority of the 414 respondents out of the 553 respondents, the main reason to work is because they would get personal satisfaction as well as salary and holding position. Unlike the other two groups, women who are currently working are both encouraged by respective their parents and husbands and they seem to be self-motivators. In future, most of them are not willing to quit.

In general, detailed analysis on the respondents' profile shows that most women consider their families when they make their work decisions, either to support their families financially or support their families non-financially. In fact, their families support and encouragement play an important role in women's decision to work. Most women subject themselves to their parents or their husbands if they are married when they make their work decision. Therefore the work decision of women in Malaysia is very much influenced by the immediate members of their respective families.

It is also important to note that economic and social background play an important role in how women make their work decisions. Women from poorer families and with lower education tend to focus on their financial needs, while women with higher educational level and richer families choose jobs that will allow them to achieve their goals and bring great self satisfaction. Therefore, it is very important for various stakeholders to consider various strategies that target different women to increase the labour force participation of Malaysian women.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that regardless of their current work status; nearly all women choose to work either in their current jobs or in the future. Some women are even considering venturing into business in the future.

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