

Child Care Matters: What Educated Mothers Need Before Entering the Labor Market

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Abstract

Individuals who succeed in higher education are supposedly skillful with very high employability rates and predictable career outcomes. In parallel with that, recent statistics show increasing number of female graduates in higher institutions in Malaysia. However, comparing regional estimates of female participation rates in the labor market, Malaysian women have a relatively low participation in labor market for decades. Among the educated women surveyed in 2017, 42 percent were outside the labor force while the married ones said they did not work to look after their children. In this qualitative study, nine educated mothers and three experts in the field were interviewed to find the real problems related to child care. The three validated themes were child care costs, availability of child care centers and child care quality. A quality child care center is usually more expensive. Although many qualified centers have been established, not all meet the needs of discerning educated mothers who can choose not to enter or exit the labor market to look after their children.

Keyword: child care, educated mothers, labor market, women participation

1. INTRODUCTION

In every society, women tend to spend more hours on unpaid work than men do. Strong social norms see women as being primarily responsible for the home and children, with men as the breadwinner (Noraini & Nor Diana, 2015). Although both husband and wife are working, the management of the household, such as tidying, washing and cooking, is usually associated with the role of women. The same goes for child care that it is more likely to be handed over to the mother than the father. This norm is no exception for mothers with higher levels of education.

However, many workplaces lack good work-life balance policies and practices such as affordable and quality child care, as well as flexible work arrangements that can facilitate the mothers' return to work after childbirth (Noraini & Nor Diana, 2015). This scenario has been the primary reason for the low participation of Malaysian women in the labor market (Suhaida, Mohd Faizal, Khalilah, Zunaidah, & Othman, 2018). Thus, household responsibilities are associated with women's participation in the labor market. When mothers enter the realm of work force, their children need to be well taken care of by individuals who can be trusted. If children, especially those who are still small, were not properly cared for by family members, they would be sent to drop-in babysitting services or child care centers.

Child care involves costs that are usually determined based on the age of the child, types of care and the facilities provided by the centers. Working mothers need to invest their money

not only for the best child care services but at the same time, according to their own education, religious and communication preferences. However, such requirements will be accompanied by higher costs. This study might well be considered an attempt in addressing child care centers that meet the requirements of Malaysian educated mothers.

2. Child care management in Malaysia

Regarding child care, Malaysian mothers could choose from either hiring a live-in maid and a nanny or send their children to a quality daycare. Bear in mind that, many babysitters or child-minders are parents themselves, and therefore sometimes have their own children to look after. It means many parents in the short run seek the grandparents' assistance or relatives to look after their children. These informal arrangements make up the majority of child care arrangements in Malaysia (Suhaida, 2016), although there are still some women who choose to take care of their children at home. Setting their own parenting rules puts most mothers in charge of their children and their lives. Of course, this can usually be done if the mothers do not work or are working remotely, as most companies require their employees to be in office. For day-to-day formal arrangements, child care centers, also known as nurseries, employ a combination of qualified and unqualified staff to care for babies and young children. Whatever the methods of child care chosen, it is recommended that parents keep a tab on their children, at all times.

Childcare management in Malaysia falls under the purview of Social Welfare Department (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat), agency under the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development's (MWFCDD). Additionally, the Community Development Department under the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development has established child care centers for parents earning low incomes as well as underprivileged caretakers in suburban communities. In 2015, about 70,000 children up to the age of 6 years old had been cared for in more than 3,800 registered child care centers in Malaysia (Suhaida, 2016). The Social Welfare Department adopts four categories of child care. Under Section 2 of the 308 Act, Taman Asuhan Kanak-Kanak (TASKA) or a child care center means any premise that receives four (4) or more children under the age of four (4) years from more than one household to be kept with wages (Malaysian Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2015a). Meanwhile, Section 5 of the same Act provides four categories of child care; child care in an institution, child care in the workplace, child care in a community, and child care in the house.

KEMAS is the acronym for Kemajuan Masyarakat or community development, established under the Community Development Department. KEMAS is responsible for the implementation of early childhood education and is committed to optimize a comprehensive human resource development effort executed through non-formal education. Both KEMAS's Taman Bimbingan Kanak-Kanak (TABIKA) and TASKA are two central managements in early childhood education administration with over 400 TASKA and 11,000 TABIKA managing about 250,000 children across Malaysia.

3. Literature review

Females who constitute almost half of the total population in Malaysia (48.3 percent in 2017) play a particularly significant role in the economy. For the development of the country, it is important to increase the participation rate of women in the labor market. Bryant et al. (2004)

stated that employment and a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase with the rising participation of women. In fact, based on a report prepared by The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2010, Malaysia's GDP would boost by 2.9 percent if its female labor force participation rate (LFPR) increased to 70 percent.

The Theory of Investment in Human Capital (Becker, 1962) explained that highly educated individuals have higher participation rates in the labor market. The government can benefit from the talent of highly educated individuals by empowering them with education and enhancing mechanisms for development of human capital. With an enhancement in human capital, employees will be better equipped to participate in the labor market in a more productive way (Fatima & Sultana, 2009). Education not only increases the supply of labor, but it also raises the probability of being in the labor force (Bradbury & Katz, 2005). Particularly for educated women, they join the labor market with the expectation of relatively higher earnings. Statistics show increasing number of female graduates from higher institutions in Malaysia. Based on this number alone, more educated women are expected to be in the labor market.

However, the main theory encapsulated in this study was the Theory of Allocation of Time (Becker, 1965), which explained that labor lead to the division of time to working hours and leisure hours. For educated married women, completing household chores during leisure hours would determine their number of working hours and participation in the labor force. Referring to a study conducted by the Malaysian Ministry Of Women, Family, and Community Development, as well as the UNDP (Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, 2014b), 66.9 percent of married women in Malaysia did not work as they had to look after their children. The case of "missing women from the labor market" refers to the situation where women either withdrew from the labor market or remained outside the labor market.

Women became increasingly likely to exit from the workforce upon the birth of a child (Hotchkiss, Pitts, & Walker, 2008; Joshi, Macran, & Dex, 1996). Even with declining fertility rates in developing countries since the 1960s (Nakagaki, 2018), the number of children is still a positive and significant determinant for women's participation in the labor force (Suhaida, Mohd Faizal, Norafifah, Abdul Qayyum, & Nor Azlina, 2016; Rahmah & Noorasiah, 2014). On the one side, having more children in a family would result in a heavier financial burden as the family faces economic pressures. This situation would compel the women to join the labor market, but this is not the case where raising up children is concerned. Looking after children takes up a significant amount of time from a working educated woman, which can discourage her from participating in the labor force.

Hence, for those women who need to work, it is really about rethinking what it means to have proper child care arrangements. Even in Mediterranean countries, limited number of research have in fact investigated on how child care arrangements could give an impact on a mother's employment (Nicodemo & Waldmann, 2009). It was found that the percentage of women with paid jobs was high when they used the service of professional childminders, as compared to unpaid care. This opinion supported a previous study by Lokshin (2004), which found that women with children were more likely to be in the labor force and to use formal care.

Caring for small children have a strong positive effect on expenditure compared to older children. The cost is higher in urban areas. Estimation results indicated that the cost of paid

care had a small negative effect on labor supply, but stronger negative effects on paid care utilization (Ribar, 1995). New mothers require more effort than experienced mothers to care for the first child. The considerably large negative estimates for infants of age zero suggested that nursing new-borns had been costly and time consuming (Ueda, 2007). Meanwhile, Connelly (1992) examined the utility maximizing framework and predicted that child care cost affected one's participation decision through its effect on the net benefit of parental time in child care. The lower rate of labor force participation among mothers of infants and preschoolers had shown to be entirely the result of the higher child care cost.

As expected by Herbst & Barnow (2007), the supply of female labor had been quite sensitive to the cost of providing child care services. This means that if the price of child care is higher, it will lead to a reduction in labor supply. In addition, child care demand is low among low-income households and increased competition from other related services reduce the existence of a child care center in an area. Du and Dong (2013) along with Kimmel and Connelly (2007), stated that the increase of the costs of hired caregivers would markedly decrease mothers' labor hour supply.

In addition, since women typically serve as primary care providers for their children, female labor force participation behavior is likely to be affected significantly by the costs associated with replacing maternal care with non-maternal care. However, a research conducted by Kimmel (1998) proved that child care prices significantly impeded married mothers' labor force participation behavior. In addition, child care elasticity had been found to be affected dramatically by the manner in which the price of care measure was constructed.

While non-working mothers are more likely to keep their children in home care than working mothers, close to half of the children attending formal care have mothers who do not work. High costs of formal child care discourage households from using this arrangement and increase the number of households relying on informal care. Besides, it proved that costs of child care can affect women's labor force participation and labor supply decisions, as well as choice of child care arrangement (Lokshin & Fong, 2006).

The availability of child care has been identified as one of the most important preconditions for married women's participation in the labor market. Analysis carried out by Del Boca & Vuri (2007) highlighted that the child care system characteristics led to child care decisions among parents and affected women's labor supply, as well as female employment rate.

Besides, since different facilities are available in urban, suburban and rural areas, the availability of child care is also related to residential location. Estimation results by Herbst & Barnow (2007) suggested that the female labor supply was sensitive to the geographic supply of child care. Specifically, this research highlighted that an increase in the number of center-based child care had been associated with the rising rates of female labor supply. For profit-oriented child care centers, the location chosen for the establishments must be in populous areas occupied by those who can afford to pay.

4. Research methodology

The first phase of this study consisted of interview sessions to identify issues women have had in relation to child care arrangement. In the second part, experts who were directly involved in this area were also interviewed. Contact with these two data sources illustrated an aim to increase the validity of variables or themes under study.

Married women with at least three children (the first requisite) were interviewed based on Malaysian women fertility rate context, which was at 2.0 in 2015. This emphasis may relate to the many findings in literature reviews of lower employment rates among married women with children. As for the second requisite, those who were interviewed must have at least one child under the age of 6 years old. This is because, the variable in having children aged less than six years old was found significant with participation of women in the labor market (Suhaida, Mohd Faizal, Azhana, Zunaidah, & Khalilah, 2017).

The women interviewed were each from different residential divisions, namely urban, suburban, and rural areas in Malaysia. Six educated mothers who are employed and unemployed from each residential division had been interviewed to obtain data saturation. In addition, three field experts were also interviewed to verify the findings and to confirm the emerging themes of the first phase of interview (the informant). The experts were selected based on their field of specialization.

A semi-structured interview style was employed to suit this study's need for in-depth investigation on child care arrangement. Open-ended questions were asked so that the informants could share their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives from the current researcher or past research findings. The interviews were conducted in a semi-formal setting to create a comfortable space for the informants. It was ensured that this study complied with ethical requirements, including actions of voluntary participation where the informants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

A total of nine informants from a convenience sampling had been interviewed in the first session, as no new insight was obtained, no new theme was identified, and no issue arose regarding a category of data (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). To validate these first phase finding, in the second phase, three experts from the three institutions involved with the issue of child care arrangements in Malaysia were interviewed. Each of them headed the Social Welfare Department, Ministry of Women, Family and Community (MWFC), and United Nations Development Program (UNDP). During all of the interviews, four concepts as stated by Yin (2009) had been utilized to establish the quality of empirical social research, which were trustworthiness, credibility, conformability, and data dependability.

5. Finding

Out of the nine educated married women with children, five of them were working on a fulltime basis, while the other four were unemployed. In each category of residential division (urban, suburban, and rural), there were three informants comprising educated married women, aged between 34 and 44, from several states in Malaysia. To validate the findings, Expert_1, Expert_2 and Expert_3 who were all policy makers and experts in the field of working women and child care in Malaysia were interviewed.

The initial themes reflected on the study's major topical areas were child care costs, availability of child care centers and child care quality. Easy access to child care affects female labor supply and female employment rate (Del Boca & Vuri, 2007). A mother will only go to work when she is not faced with the problem of who will take care of her children and where her children can be placed when she works. Such information was discovered from the interview findings.

Child care costs. All the informants consistently highlighted that the cost of child care was expensive, although there was an informant who lived in a rural area claimed that the cost of child care was still relatively cheaper. For example, according to Mrs. W/R/1, who had information about child care centers near her home said that, the cost of child care was based on a child's age. The cost of taking care of a baby from 7.00am until 6.00pm was RM350 (USD89). For children aged 3 years and above, the rates varied between full- or half-day services for an average of RM180 (USD46). Mrs. W/R/1 further added: "I have three children. I can't afford to send them to the nursery with my current income." On the other hand, Mrs. NW/SU/6 said: "When I stopped working, we could save the cost of their care." She chose to stop working two years ago and take care of her own children as it is more worthwhile as compared to the child care costs when she was still working.

Overall, some of the informants felt that they could not afford to bear the cost of child care, especially when the number of children increased in a household. Some informants had chosen to hire a maid while some felt that they could save on family expenses by taking care of their own children. Nevertheless, opportunity costs could be reduced when they chose not to work. These findings had been somewhat consistent with discussions by Wetzels (2005), Kimmel (1998), Connelly (1992) and Rita (1979). Evidently, high child care costs have proven to be a burden for families, especially families with many children. As agreed by Expert_1 and Expert_2, although government subsidies for child care services are given to parents who are qualified, the eligibility for it is very limited. The support system is categorized according to low-income parents in order to ease their financial burden. This limited subsidy however, depends on the budget provided by the central government.

Availability of child care centers. Only one of the informants mentioned problems concerning access to child care centers. Eight others did not face with such problems regardless of their location (urban, suburban or rural). Thus, any formal (nursery or kindergarten) or informal (babysitter) caring for children would be attainable if a child care center is easily accessed by educated married women in Malaysia.

As told by Informant_4, "I know the government is announcing a budget to set up a nursery in every workplace, but that still has not manifested in my department since we are not headquarters. Besides, they service is given according to salaries and household income. Therefore, I will not be eligible for it even though I have seven children." For Informant_7, the absence of a child care center at her former workplace had caused her to send her child to a relatively expensive nursery.

The field experts had all agreed on the emergence of this theme in the study. However, although the number of accessible child care centers are increasing in most areas in Malaysia, there are parents who are not satisfied with the quality of the centers, as highlighted by Yamauchi (2010). Some informants opted for residential care facilities offered by neighbors and their own contacts to look after their children. Bear in mind that, no informant had said that their employers or former employers provided child care centers at the workplace.

Expert_1 said that there were indeed many registered public child care centers, especially in urban areas. However, not all have contributed towards increasing female employment rate by setting up proper nurseries at the public workplace. As a guide, to encourage the establishment of child care centers in the private sector, the government provided several incentives such as grants and tax exemptions. Expert_2 added: "There will be a child care

center for those who need it, and yet however, it is up to the owners to establish its location based on the rules set by authorities.”

Quality child care. Some parents do not put their child into a care facility due to various factors. According to Mrs. NW/U/2, she had never sent her children to informal child care although there was a housewife near her home who received babies to be taken care of during the day. She was still breastfeeding and was worried about the housewife taking her children out of her home, such as when the need to go shopping or visit a neighbor’s house arises. Mrs. NW/U/2’s however, said: “Children with a babysitter in a house... (The babysitters) have no standard procedures for child care as in a registered nursery, but this was the only choice I had due to expensive costs of care at registered child care centers.”

While agreeing that the cost of child care is not cheap (Wong, 2014; Boo, 2013), all experts in the field confirmed that the quality of child care should be given priority. Wherever possible, they highlighted that educated mothers and professionals must consider the quality of child care centers before they choose to stop working. And whenever they do end up leaving their jobs for the sake of their children, it may be wiser to reconsider that decision, as the country will lose a source of talent. Therefore, the government should pay more attention to providing adequate funding to ensure affordable and quality child care centers for all parents.

Expert_3 believed that the number of child care centers in this country was not enough. She said in terms of ratio, the number of children with the number of registered child care centers did not match. She added that the more important thing to do was to increase the quality of child care centers, and not only increase the numbers. The quality of child care should appear “balance” for all children and can be enhanced through efforts such as use of attractive learn and play activities to improve children’s communication skills and getting a good safety fencing and the like.

6. DISCUSSION

Assuming parents are generally looking for a comfortable child care center. Their consideration would be channeled towards the warmth appeal of the facility, and the kind of interaction that may occur between their child and the caregiver. Looking for values that are similar to their own practices may set the right tone for their own search. Other practical things that are worth looking into include affordable prices, premise location, past performance and efficient systems for assessing their children’s learning progress. The general principles would help determine the child care arrangement decisions made by mothers when they go to work. However, educated mothers are usually fussier because they are more attentive and know what they want.

However, each child care center is unique and seeking the advice of professionals in the field will help educated mothers to ensure that they are making the best possible industrial choice for the children. Remember to keep an open mind as the facilities are a lot better nowadays. To avoid having regrets later on, educated women will speak to others who are involved as they may bring up suggestions that had not been considered before. If the educated mothers feel hesitant about the safety and quality aspects of a child care center, they can easily look for other establishments. However, a quality child care center can be more expensive and therefore they would have to give enough thought to what they plan to commit. If they

choose to stop working because there are no quality child care centers available, the country will lose a source of talent.

As for the overall conclusion, the findings obtained from this qualitative study had examined the child care arrangement problems faced by educated mothers and the need to leave their children to a third party while they are at work. The emerging child care problems had caused some mothers to not conform to the Theory of Investment in Human Capital (Becker, 1962) because they chose not to work despite years of investment in their education. The three themes validated by the informants and experts in the field had answered the main research question; what are the problems faced by educated working mothers in relation to child care arrangement?

Assuming the educated mothers are unable to overcome the problems in finding child care centers that meet their needs, or if their problem concerns the cost of care. They may have no other choice but reduce the need for participating in the labor market for the sake of their children or child care fees that will cost them more money. Rationally, a backward-bending labor supply curve for educated married women is caused by their need to source for alternative routes in child care arrangement, instead of playing an active role in the economy

7. FUTURE DIRECTION FOR RESEARCH, PRACTICE AND POLICY

It has been proposed that the government expand the coverage of their nurseries and kindergartens by KEMAS for low-income and underprivileged parents, especially among rural and suburban communities. In each state, children aged 4 to 6 years have been made to enroll into a number of classes deemed appropriate for them in TABIKA kindergartens. The number of TASKA nurseries for children aged 2 to 4, however, need to be increased in densely populated states. Compared to east Malaysian state Sarawak, the number of TASKA available in west Malaysian states like Kuala Lumpur and Selangor was found to be respectively low.

The above suggestions are intended not only for class expansions, but also for the enrolment of children below the age of 2 into TASKA. A monthly fee of between RM30.00 and RM180.00 for full day babysitting 6 days a week from 7.30 am to 5.00 pm. For half-day services, a minimum monthly fee of RM10.00 from 7.30 am -1.00 pm, 5 days a week has been imposed (Ministry of Rural and Regional, 2018). It is believed that there are no cheaper fees than those set by the TASKA Committee based on the capability of parents and the economy of the local community. Basically, the expansion on the number of TASKA involves addressing the groups believed to demand for it even if they are not from the target groups. It must be ensured that the TASKA be kept at an optimal state for it to be essential in facilitating parents' need for a safe child care environment while they are at work. Furthermore, expensive costs of registered nurseries affect the rate at which parents send their children to unregistered residential care facilities, including neighbors. In the press, reports on the existence of illegal nurseries still exist. Without proper babysitting training and monitoring by the authority, the safety of children in unregistered nurseries cannot be guaranteed. In fact, if there are elements of negligence in illegal nurseries, the wrongdoers cannot be properly prosecuted. Hence, it is crucial for the government to punish those who set up the illegal practices and for all parties to ensure that the registered nurseries are closely monitored for cleanliness, comfort, and safety. Parents also should be given access to lodge immediate complaints to the institutions that monitor child care facilities.

In the long term, the provision of child care centers in the workplace may lead to accelerated and healthy female employment rate. In order to prevent unwanted occurrences, these centers should be managed by agencies with wider jurisdictions. Currently, the MWFCDC is only able to act as a coordinator that seeks the cooperation of other agencies to manage the child care centers in the workplace. As stated by Expert_2: “To set up child care in existing workplace buildings will require the involvement by the local authorities, fire department and ministry of health. We can only regulate.”

Hence, it is recommended strongly by these findings that only facilities that reach performance targets, including quality measures, can be operated in the country. Quality child care, provides a responsive, developmentally appropriate environment for young children that adds to a quality home environment, and leads to the best possible physical, intellectual and social-emotional development in the child (McKim, 1993). Parents who know that their child is receiving quality child care can be assured that they are safe, nurtured and being challenged to learn.

With quality nurseries, aspects of learning and teaching can be monitored properly, while the safety of children assured. And since quality nurseries may involve higher costs, it is desirable for the government to give adequate funding for the initial investment in human capital in line with the opinion of Expert_3.

Malaysia is often recommended to emulate all that developed countries do to provide quality child care arrangements. For example, families in France with at least two children under 18 are granted family allowances. France also offers several benefits to reduce professional activities, so parents can stay at home with children. In Germany, child benefits can be claimed for children under 18, which can be extended up to the age of 21 if unemployment issues arise. The children would still benefit from this assistance up to the age of 27 if they are still in school or training, regardless of their parents' income. Disability benefits, on the other hand, can be claimed at any age (Ministry of Women and Family Development Malaysia, 2014b).

Government support for and involvement in child care are deemed essential to provide equitable access to quality child care because private markets for child care tend to create cost barriers for low-income families (Du & Dong, 2013). Quality child care centers target overall wellness of the children and are not just a place where working parents hand over their children to be cared for by a third party. Thus, child care centers in Malaysia must ensure utmost quality management through an integrated approach of care and education.

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