

POSITIONING CHILDCARE MATTERS AMONG WORKING MOTHERS

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Abstract: The involvement of females in the labor market nowadays has become vital to fulfill the demand from organizations. This paper discusses the factors that relate to childcare that affects mothers' involvement in the labor market. The availability of childcare influences the participation of mothers in the labor force. There are some areas that are difficult to find childcare places that can give satisfaction to mothers because they are in an isolated area. Next, the quality of childcare becomes a priority for parents nowadays to ensure their children's safety. Recently, parents have started to be more alert about the education offered by childcare services because they prefer their children to learn at an early age. This means that, in addition to childcare, the educational aspect is important. In addition, the accessibility of childcare is also important because there are areas that are inaccessible to childcare centers due to certain circumstances. However, all the aspects potentially increase the childcare fees, resulting in the service becoming more expensive. The high cost of care will increase the financial burden on low-income parents. For that reason, there are mothers who are willing to forgo their careers to take care of their children. However, to what extent do the above issues really relate to working mothers in Malaysia? Therefore, the objective of this paper is to review the factors related to childcare matters that influence Malaysian mothers' participation in the labor force.

Keywords: Childcare, Female Labor Force, Working Mothers

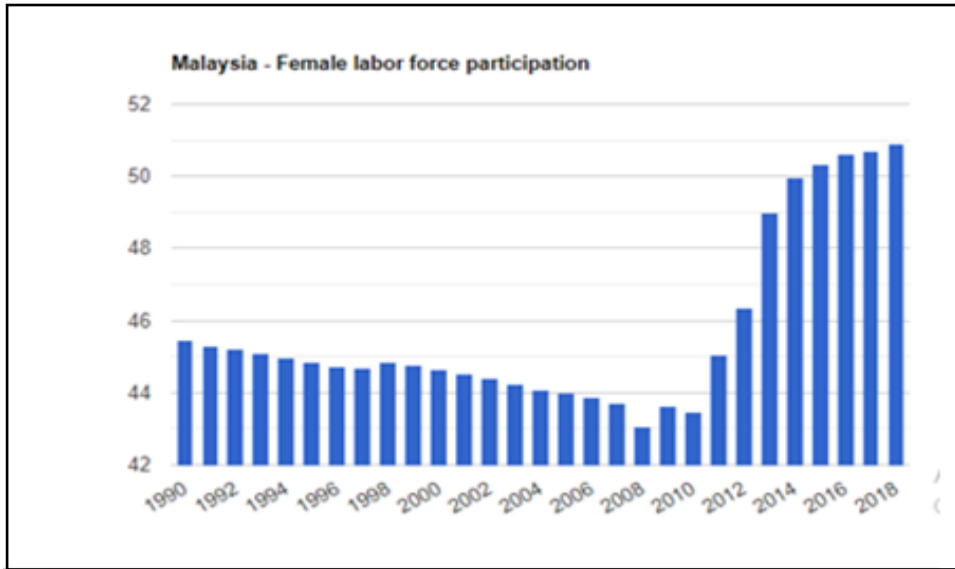
1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, human resources become necessary in both developing and developed countries in order to consider the advancement of technologies, rapid competition and innovation. Labor resources act as the crucial input that helps the development of technologies and create efficiency towards an organization (Andrijevi & Bilas, 2010). The involvement of female labor is vital as they offer a lot of help towards the economic growth of their countries because economic development depends on their expertise and abilities (Orhan, 2017). In addition, according to Hosney (2016), women's labor participation is needed in order for a nation to enhance and grow socio-economically because women can promote productivity, and they are skillful than men.

The participation of women in the Malaysian economic development is impressive, and the government and society realize it as well (Halim, Aziz & Samsudin, 2016). Males have dominated the labor market for a long time, but nowadays, the trend of women being involved in the labor force has changed, whereby there is an increase starting from 2010 at 43.46% to 50.9% in 2018 as shown in Figure 1 (The World Bank, 2019).

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Figure 1: Female Labor Force in Malaysia



Sources: The World Bank

However, women’s participation in the labor market among Malaysians is still low compared to other ASEAN countries. Malaysia ranked 8th out of 10 countries with 50.78% as of 2017. In terms of world ranking, Malaysia is ranked 106th. This shows that Malaysia is still behind, and more female labor is needed to strengthen the economic sustainability (International Labor Organization, 2017).

Table 1.1: Female Labor Force Participation Rate by ASEAN countries, 2017

Countries	Female Participation Rate -2017 (%)
Cambodia	80.94
Laos	76.87
Vietnam	73.24
Singapore	60.47
Thailand	60.47
Brunei	59.02
Myanmar	51.27
Malaysia	50.78
Indonesia	50.74
Philippines	49.58

Sources: International Labour Organization, ILOSTAT database

Numerous studies have discussed the reasons why the participation rate of women in the labor force is low in Malaysia (Halim & Aziz, 2016; Lim, 2018; Bakar & Abdullah 2007). Many of these reasons are associated with childcare and childcare arrangement (Lin, 2007; Qinfen, 2017; Chiam, 2018). Number of children, age of children, household income, and number of childcare services are among the factors that are discussed in relation to the participation of mothers in the labor market.

The rising cost of living also affects household income. If a family's financial resources are derived from one source only, normally a father, it is difficult to feel comfortable, especially if the family resides in one of the big cities. Therefore, working mothers can increase their household income. However,

childcare matters are vital for mothers before deciding to enter the labor market. Unfortunately, childcare fees are too high, and they cannot afford to pay for the best services for their children (McDonnell & Doyle, 2019). Accessibility to childcare centers, whether near to the workplace or near to home, and the level of safety and quality offered by the centers are important aspects that mothers should consider before leaving their children under the care of others before leaving for work.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Participation of mothers in the labor market

As a norm, childcare is associated to the mother's responsibilities. Therefore, a mother can only go out to work and participate in the labor market if she can resolve the issue of childcare. Thus, mothers' employment can be defined as someone who has the capability to handle two things at one time, which are their career and responsibility of raising their children (Halim, Aziz & Samsudin, 2016).

A publication team from Victoria Daily Times mentioned, "The place of the mother of her family is at home" for the edition of 10 April 1920. In the midst of the Second World War about twenty-five years later, one publication made an argument about responsibility of mothers who have to stay at home and take care of their children. The debate was about mothers who only need to take care of their children at home because they believed that the future of the country depends on the quality of their children rather than their work. The working mother is against the custom and purity of the home. However, mothers do find the satisfaction of making money and earning their own income. By the late 1960s, working mothers had established themselves as permanent workers in the labor force (Pasolli, 2015).

The study from recent cohorts in the United Kingdom and United States mentioned that the number of mothers re-entering the labor market is increasing after their child reaches one year old. Additionally, research has shown that mothers who work continuously after having a child have many adverse effects on future working lives (Kodagoda, 2014). However, in Pakistan, the working mother is a newer trend compared to the west because of the Pakistani culture in which females are prohibited from working. Nowadays, modern women in the Pakistani society have joined the workforce for several reasons, such as getting more job opportunities, working for personal fulfillment and shifting traditional gender roles, as well as to start changing their lives for the better (Kassamali & Rattani, 2014).

In Malaysia, the rising number of female labors has become a common phenomenon, but for employed mothers, despite being hired, are still primarily responsible for family affairs and parenting concerns. There can be challenges or pressures created by difficulties in the balance between work and family. As a married couple, tolerance in all aspects such as household chores and taking care of children is essential to ensure the happiness of the family (Sabil & Surena, 2011).

Additionally, the economy is another crucial factor that influences mothers to get involved in the labor market. Recently, the economic condition has been quite tough on families and mothers have tried to aid their family's financial issues by working. The consequences of work disruption are another influential economic concern. Most of the mothers avoid extending their maternity leave to ensure that they will not be terminated by the employers (Hixson, 2010).

2.2. Childcare Arrangement

Childcare arrangement is an important factor that can determine a mother's decision whether to participate or not in the labor market. According to Nicodemo and Waldmann (2009), working mothers who are involved in the labor market have to be more alert and aware of the type of childcare that provides the best services for their children while they are working. One of the barriers that worries mothers to remain in the labor market is the fact that they have to consider their children. Therefore, childcare arrangement is necessary for mothers before entering the labor market to ensure that their children are well cared for (Hosney, 2016).

The career-driven mothers need to sacrifice their passion towards their work in order to take care of their children due to the lack of childcare arrangement provided. Center for American Progress conducted a survey in 2018, which showed that mothers are 40% more likely than fathers to experience negative impacts of childcare issues on their jobs (Schochet, 2019). It shows that mothers have always decided based on, not economic or career ambitions, but childcare consideration and they must let go of their careers if there are no childcare options offered.

Most countries experience the same issue with childcare, which is the increased and high prices of childcare services. In the United States, the news and article from the media reported that the cost of childcare has grown so much that families have suffered from serious financial difficulties (Herbst, 2015). Other than that, there are issues of unlicensed childcare centers in Delaware County known as “a rural periphery” country in the New York state (Bames, 2006).

Besides that, some of the mothers in Malaysia employ a house cleaner, send the children to a nursery, or get help from their parents for support to take care of their children while they are working. The first choice is always for grandparents and relatives because the safety aspect is more secure. Generally, when a maid is employed, mothers have instructions and establish rule-based requirements for the maid to take care of their children at home. Parents find this as one of the safest and most realistic options for their children because the helpers can also do their household chores (SM Amin, 2016).

The Child Care Centre Act 1984 acts as a guideline whereby the minimal standards and regulations have been set by the Malaysian government. The Child Care Centre Act 1984 also controls the registration process and inspection of childcare centers. The Social Welfare Department, with the cooperation of the Skill Development Department, Ministry of Human Resources, has drawn up the Standard Practice and Standard Content for childcare providers in accordance with the National Occupation Skill Standard (Chiam, 2008). The necessary tool that encourages working mothers to get involved in the labor market is childcare. If working mothers could get the childcare that meets their satisfaction, the labor market will get more participation from mothers (Hosney, 2016).

Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM) or the Social Welfare Department under the Malaysian Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development is responsible for the management of childcare. However, being committed to focus on human resource development, the Community Development Department under the Malaysian Ministry of Rural and Regional Development has established childcare centers for those earning a lower income, as well as those who are underprivileged, especially in rural and suburban communities.

Besides that, to protect the children from harm, abuse, and exploitation, Malaysia - ratified The Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1995. Article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for appropriate measures to ensure that children of working parents have the right to benefit from childcare services and facilities for which they are eligible (The, Place, & Employers, 2010).

2.2.1. Availability of childcare

Availability means that there is an opportunity for childcare places nearby. The Australian government survey found that parents consider availability, proximity, or in other words, a location that is near to them and flexibility in its opening hours as important criteria of childcare (Joseph, 2018). The best choice of a childcare package is influenced by the availability and cost of each mode of care. The total number of registered children in centers classified as formal childcare varies greatly across countries. In Korea, the range of attendance rates of young children is not more than 10 percent. Meanwhile, the rates exceed 50 percent in most countries in southern and eastern Europe. The data collected from a range of different sources cannot account for other differences in childcare patterns, such as the number of hours a child typically spends in formal care (Barber & Barber, 2006).

In Italy, Chiuri (2000) mentioned that the availability of places is more sensitive compared to changes in the price of childcare fees that parents have to pay. Hence, female labor participation in the labor market is more dependent on the household's characteristics and the lack of informal care. According to Boca (2015), the probability of using formal childcare and the mother's involvement in the labor force is influenced by the availability of places.

Furthermore, from the Malaysian aspect, there are a few types of childcare under the Social Welfare Department in which mothers can enroll their children. There are four types of childcare that are available, as reported in 2016 by categories that include the workplace-based childcare center, community-based childcare center, institution-based childcare center, and home-based childcare center. These types of childcare centers are available across all states in Malaysia (Social Welfare Department, 2016).

There is a finding from a previous study based on mothers' experiences with childcare. Majority of mothers mentioned that they are not having difficulties seeking childcare as they live in either urban or rural areas (SM Amin, 2016). However, a registered and fully qualified care home is a bit difficult to obtain. Therefore, if childcare places are not available to them, they may decide not to work.

2.2.2. Accessibility of childcare

Accessibility is defined as the ability of parents to access childcare services at a suitable location, within reasonable distance of workplace or home, and at suitable times and hours needed. Recently, based on an Australian government survey, the accessibility of childcare is the most significant factor chosen by parents. Data from the 2017 Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey explained that there is a difficulty experienced by parents who seek and have intention towards available and accessible childcare. According to the survey, majority of the parents who face difficulties in choosing childcare reported accessibility as a crucial determinant (Joseph, 2018).

Besides that, there is an additional question about the flexibility and affordability of childcare, whether it can satisfy the parents' demands, especially for those who are not working based on office hours (Baxter & Hand, 2016). In Australia, Joseph (2018) explained that every quarter of the year, majority of childcare centers are examined by the Department of Education and Training, and the department also prepares reports on the vacancies of childcare centers. However, the report on vacancies of childcare centers does not mention whether the childcare centers are accessible or meet the mothers' needs. It is necessary to ensure that the availability of childcare can be accessed by the mothers. For example, a place for school-aged children cannot cater to and is not suitable for one-year-old children. In other words, it is hard to replace different types of services.

A member of Ramping Up Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) task force under Women, Family and Community Development Ministry known as Wong mentioned that there are not enough registered childcare centers, especially in isolated and semi-rural areas (Chin, 2016). The mothers in rural areas cannot afford to pay the fees and also find it difficult to access affordable childcare centers around the area.

2.2.3. Education of childcare

Nowadays, the parents prefer their children to achieve and learn at an early age from childcare centers or preschools (Yueh & Alison, 2012). In addition, in order to fulfill the preferences of parents, childcare providers must start to focus on teaching skills and knowledge to the children.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in Canada consider that ECEC programs will concentrate on promoting learning and physical activities that bring healthiness to children and give special attention to the needs of the children in vulnerable groups ("Childhood The Voice The Canadian Public Health Association is the", 2016).

Education is necessary for an individual to achieve success and create more opportunities in the future. Hence, it helps to build self-confidence and develop the personality of the individuals. Additionally, early education will help children to be more active and teach them to distinguish right and wrong, as well as teaching them to easily take care of themselves without worrying their mothers (Shuaibi, 2014).

Recently, there is an increasing demand for early childhood education in Malaysia. Firstly, Malaysia's rapid economic development has resulted in an increase in the number of mothers involved in the workforce. Strong initiatives by the government and non-government agencies, along with an improved access to higher education, have empowered a larger percentage of Malaysian women to get involved in the labor force.

Besides that, Early Child Care and Education in Malaysia comes under two ministries, which are the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and the Ministry of Education. Hence, the need for childcare has grown alongside the increase in women's participation rate in the labor force. This has triggered a rise in the demand for non-parental care for children. More preschools have appeared all over the country to cater to the needs of children and families. In Malaysia, Early Child Care and Education in Malaysia comes under two ministries, which are the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, and the Ministry of Education. Children below 4 years old are under the former ministry, while children between 5 to 6 years old are under the latter ministry.

In the early 1900s, there were Informal Early Childhood Education (ECE) centers established by various communities in Malaya during the British Colonial era. To ensure the effectiveness of the ECCE, the Ministry of Education, Malaysia has decided to impose a minimum qualification condition for all preschool teachers in the country. By the year 2020, all preschool teachers in Malaysia must meet the minimum requirement of a diploma in early childhood education (Foong, Velo, Dhamotharan & Loh, 2018).

2.2.4. Quality of childcare

The process quality and structural quality, quality service, management perception, and customer satisfaction are necessary to measure the level of quality (Yueh & Alison, 2012). Process quality can be explained as actual experiences, including children's interactions with caregivers and friends, as well as their participation in various activities. Structural quality refers to the ratios of children to staff, caregivers' formal education, and caregivers' training related to children.

There are several aspects that can explain the quality of childcare: first, safety and hygiene standards, followed by the number of staff and the size of groups, qualifications of the staff, parental involvement, and compliance with certain educational policies. It is quite hard to measure the quality of childcare because there is no suitable indicator that can be used to track the quality of the service environment and also the quality between staff and the children (Yueh & Alison, 2012).

The quality of childcare is a priority for mothers in their decision to send their children to selected childcare centers. Working mothers in Malaysia are aware and concerned about the safety of their

children. At the same time, they are also conflicted between sending their children to a childcare center or nursery. High-quality childcare is needed by mothers because while they are working, they would not have to think much about their children's safety (Rokis, 2014). However, according to Mutalib, Saleh, and Masod (2018), childcare centers in Malaysia need to be more alert and focused on safety and quality issues. Actions of improvement need to be taken immediately upon childcare centers to prevent unexpected and unwanted incidents happening to the children.

Selangor Taska Association president, Mahanom Basri said that operators would not intentionally increase fees without first matching it with quality service. Most of the childcare providers have either a diploma or a degree and sometimes work more than 10 hours per day, but they receive lower wages to ensure the best quality to the children (Hamdan, 2016).

2.2.5. Cost of childcare

Limited resources such as financial constraints, transportation and housing affect the decision of mothers to get involved in the labor market. Childcare is the largest expense faced by mothers, especially for those who come from lower income background. Due to the high fees of childcare, parents need to struggle on their own to fulfill the childcare expenses, and it is burdensome for parents (Ojumbo, 2015).

Childcare costs can be calculated by the care of each child per hour. A previous study showed that childcare policies influence family behavior, and the prices of childcare can be an estimate for married women. The percentage of employed mothers was estimated to increase from 58.8% to 87% if the childcare costs were zero. Most studies examined that childcare costs are a very necessary factor of employment decisions by married women, ranging from 0.38 to 0.07 (Boca, 2015).

Price balance between childcare supply and demand is assumed when evaluating formal childcare. In this case, low-income families would face difficulties to pay childcare fees if the demand for childcare exceeds the supply and the mothers have to sacrifice their career and exit the labor market. In contrast, it is quite difficult for families that have different levels of income to access childcare when the prices are controlled (Lorant & Petrella, 2011).

Many countries face high costs of childcare, and the Commonwealth funding for childcare began with the introduction of the Child Care Act in 1972. In the following decades since then, governments have used a range of financing mechanisms to support services to the families that use them (Brennan, 2014). In Malaysia, studies conducted at several nurseries around Klang Valley found that minimum fees charged to parents for one child is RM1000 (Zainudin, 2016).

A survey from Free Malaysia Today (FMT) mentioned that parents who need to pay at least RM1000 a month for one child said that the price is too high. The cost of childcare is predicted to increase between 10 to 30 percent more by 2019 (Kamal, 2018). Consequently, the cost of childcare is considered expensive by some families, resulting in some mothers choosing to take care of their own children and keeping out of the labor market.

3. Research Methodology

This conceptual paper is focused exclusively on the literature review. The results of previous studies are critically reviewed to strengthen this study at a later stage. Google search engine is one of the methods that are used to collect and analyze the literature. A few databases such as ProQuest and Emerald Insight are used to find more articles and information to strengthen all the arguments and points presented in this paper.

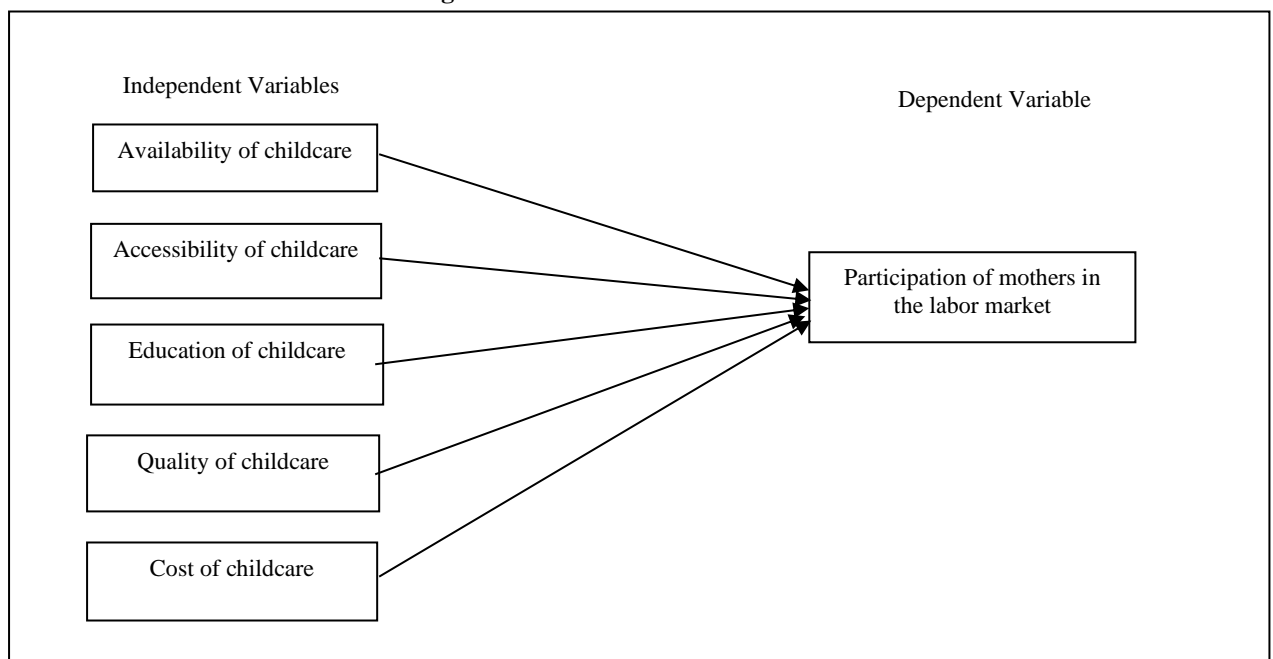
This study focuses on childcare matters and mothers' participation in the labor market. The questionnaire for this paper will be created using the internet survey software and social media as the

platform to distribute questionnaires to respondents. Based on the convenience sampling method, working mothers with children are the respondents for this study. 384 respondents are estimated to answer the questionnaires. The questionnaires will start with section A that consists of questions on Demographic background, while section B is dedicated to the dependent variable (Participation of mothers in the labor market) and Section C for the independent variables (Availability of childcare, accessibility of childcare, education of childcare, quality of childcare and cost of childcare). This study will use Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) as the software to analyze the results.

With regard to the findings, the study about childcare matters in Malaysia is relatively small. This study is very significant to ensure that working mothers participate in the labor market. The factors that affect decision of mothers to work must be investigated.

Based on previous research, the factors mentioned are still relevant to the situation in Malaysia. In addition, this study aims to discuss five factors that will influence the mothers' participation in the labor market regarding childcare, namely availability, accessibility, quality, education, and cost. The interaction between factors is shown below in Figure 1.2.

Figure 2: Research Framework



4. Conclusion

The involvement of women in the labor market is starting to show an increasing trend from 2010 to 2018, which shows that women are well-welcomed in the labor market (The World Bank, 2019). Studies have shown that women's contributions are also important today, including contributions to a country's economic and political sectors. However, statistics also show that women's participation rates in the labor market are not sufficient. Still, many who receive higher education can contribute to the family and national economy but are prevented from doing so. Previous studies have shown that childcare-related factors or childcare matters are a major contributing factor.

In specific, childcare matters involve extensive discussion. In Malaysia, the availability and accessibility act as crucial factors that will affect the participation of mothers in the labor market which without it, mothers would face difficulties to find childcare places. Besides that, education is one of the criteria that most mothers nowadays seek because early education creates a lot of benefits for their children. The quality of childcare in Malaysia still needs improvement to ensure the safety and comfort

of the children to stay in childcare centers. Last but not least, the fees of childcare services are also one of the factors that influence mothers to leave their careers willingly to take care of their children on their own. The high fees of childcare are a burden to the mothers, and they cannot afford to pay them monthly. Based on all the factors mentioned, it is believed that by helping them to get easy access to the labor market, it will increase involvement of mothers in the labor market. Suggestions for increasing the participation of working mothers in the Malaysian labor market will be in line with the findings of this study.

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