

# **HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA**

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## **1. Introduction**

The overall objective of this paper is to provide a critical evaluation of the existing national policies and programmes in human resource development aimed at fostering the diversification of skill for women in industry in Malaysia. This evaluation is intended to highlight the main gaps and deficiencies that exist in these areas in a global setting that is increasingly characterised by rapid changes in technology and consumer preferences, leading to new demands on the composition of industrial skills in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

The paper is divided into five main sections. The first section deals with current trends and emerging needs for promoting occupational diversification for women in industry in the larger region. This section provides a quantitative and qualitative examination of regional trends in women labour force participation, occupational mobility, wage growth and emerging skill requirements. The second section focuses on the national policies and programmes of Malaysia with particular reference to the advancement of women and their integration in the industrial sector. The critical role of various national institutions in fostering development is also appraised in this section. The third section of the paper identifies the main problems and constraints that have stood in the

way of designing effective national policies and programmes in Malaysia, including institutional rigidities and socio-cultural obstacles that affect women development in general. The fourth section provides an analysis of the role of the public and private sectors and the non-governmental organisations (NGO's) in developing and implementing plans and programmes aimed at fostering diversified skill development for women in industry. The last section of the paper suggests several concrete, action-oriented strategies that can promote diversified skill development for women in industry in Malaysia. These strategies include the role of appropriate policies and programmes in a wide range of fields to be implemented by public sector that can directly or indirectly affect women's participation in industry.

For the purpose of the paper, the definition of human resource development activities used refers to the set of activities including education and training that are concerned with the balancing of present and future supply of human resource needs of the economy with the objective of achieving the highest level of skill development and effective employment within the context of the overall economic and social development target of the country. In carrying out this planning, the issue of the participation of women in the development process generally and in the industrial sector in particular has rightly become a matter of some priority. As Malaysia becomes transformed from an agricultural-based to an industrial economy, it is important that policy makers and planners become more sensitive to the various ways in which women, traditionally a disadvantaged groups within the community, might become further marginalised by the changes. Women have contributed much to the industrial development process in Malaysia. The potential for substantially enhancing their contribution is great. The correct mix of policies and incentives to enhance skills of women in industry will not only ensure increased utilisation of women's labour and improvements in their productivity: they will also help to increase incomes and reduce poverty and

unemployment in which women are currently disproportionately represented, enhancing overall economic growth and development. Besides, as others have pointed out(1), an egalitarian distribution of employment, skills and income by sex should itself be a goal of development.

## **2. Regional Trends in Women Labour Force Participation : Occupational Mobility and Wages in Relation to Advancement and Integration of Women in Industry.**

In the Asia-Pacific region, female participation in the labour force in the past two decades has increased substantially due to efforts at integrating them into the mainstream of development. As of 1986, women accounted for above a third of the total labour force in 12 out of 19 countries listed in Table 1. However, substantial regional and national variations existed with South-Asian countries having a lower female share of the labour force and Bangladesh and Pakistan registering only 6.9% and 11.7% female participation rates respectively in 1986. Women in South-East and East Asia as a whole fared better and in Thailand and China their rate of participation is above 40%.

Besides their increased participation in the respective national economies, other structural changes in the pattern of female employment can be discerned. Whilst the major proportion of the employed females in the Asia-Pacific region used to be found in agriculture and agro-related activities, almost all countries have witnessed an increased flow of women to industry over the 20 years. In particular, the redeployment of labour-intensive industries to the Asian Newly Industrialised Countries (NICS) has created increased employment opportunities for women in the industrial sector so that in some countries women now account for over one-third or more of the labour force in the manufacturing sector (see Table 2).

**Table 1 : Female Labour Force - Percentage of Total  
1975, 1980 and 1986**

Country or Area	1975	1980	1986
South Asia			
Bangladesh	5.8	6.3	6.9
India	28.5	27.2	26.0
Nepal	34.9	34.9	34.2
Pakistan	9.8	10.4	11.7
Sri Lanka	25.6	26.9	26.9
South-East and East Asia			
Burma	39.3	39.1	37.8
Indonesia	30.8	31.3	31.3
Malaysia	33.0	31.3	31.3
Singapore	30.7	34.5	33.1
Philippines	32.8	32.9	32.0
Thailand	47.1	47.1	45.6
China	42.4	43.2	43.2
Hong Kong	35.4	35.5	34.3
Republic of Korea	33.3	34.1	34.0
Japan	38.3	37.7	37.8
Pacific Countries			
Australia	34.4	37.5	37.9
Fiji	14.9	17.5	19.3
Papua New Guinea	41.2	40.9	39.6
New Zealand	31.6	34.0	34.6

Source: World Bank, World Tables 1987, New York, 1987.

Female incorporation into industry has been fastest in countries actively encouraging export-processing zones and foreign manufacturing investment. In Hong Kong and Singapore, females' share of industrial labour force rose from 42% to 47% and 34% to 44% respectively between 1970/71 to 1982. Female integration into industry has also been most noticeable in Malaysia where their share of industrial employment

**Table 2 : Employment : Percentage of Manufacturing in Total  
Employment and Women's Share in Manufacturing, 1980's.**

Country		Total Employment (Thousands)	Share of Manufacturing in Total Employment (%)	Share of Women in Total Manufacturing (%)
Hong Kong	1985	2,543	36.1	46.5
India	1984	24,142	25.6	9.5
Japan	1985	58,070	25.0	39.5
Rep. of Korea	1985	14,935	23.4	38.7
Philippines	1985	20,327	9.5	48.7
Singapore	1985	1,154	25.5	44.3
Sri Lanka	1984	956.5	20.8	37.8
Indonesia	1980	N. A.	9.0	44.8
Pakistan	1981	N. A.	8.9	5.9
Thailand	1980	N. A.	7.9	42.1

N. A. : Not Available

Source : (a) United Nations (U. N.), 1989 World Survey on the role of Women in development, New York, 1989, pp. 132-133.

(b) ESCAP, Status of Women, p. 17.

jumped from 28% in 1970 to 41% in 1980, in the Philippines (from 40% in 1975 to 49% in 1986) and in Indonesia and Thailand where they account for 45% and 42% of the industrial workforce respectively in 1982 (see Table 3). In China, the encouragement of both rural enterprises and special Economic Zones has led to a substantial increase in women's participation in the industrial workforce so that female workers comprised 44% of the total by 1982. In all these countries the trends in the 1980's indicate that numerically the proportion of women in industry has increased to the point where it is higher than in other developed countries.

The increase of female participation in industry has been smaller in South Asia due mainly to the slower pace of industrialisation in the

**Table 3 : Asian Women in the Manufacturing Workforce.  
1970's to 1980's**

Country		
Bangladesh	1974	1984
	4	28
China	N. A.	1982
		44
Hong Kong	1971	1982
	42	47
Indonesia	1974	1980
	48	45
Japan	1970	1982
	36	39
Republic of Korea	1970	1982
	36	39
Malaysia	1970	1980
	28	41
Pakistan	N. A.	1981
		6
Philippines	1975	1986
	40	49
Sri Lanka	N. A.	1981
		35
Thailand	1970	1980
	43	42

N. A. : Not Available

Source : Figures for all countries except Sri Lanka, Malaysia, China and Bangladesh have been obtained from ESCAP, *Status of Women*. Table 7, p. 17. The other countries' figures have been obtained from International Labour Organisation, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* (various years), Geneva.

region, but there are significant country differences. Women accounted for about 33% of the industrial employment in Sri Lanka in 1981, 28% in Bangladesh in 1984 and only 6% in Pakistan in 1981. However, these

officially reported rates are probably underestimated. In Muslim countries especially, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh where traditional cultural systems are closely linked with economic life in ways that restrict women's mobility, women involvement in industrialisation has been through the "putting-out" system which is often not covered in the official statistics. Thus, women's actual rate of participation are likely to be higher than official figures suggest.

The increasing share of women in the industrial workforce, however, does not necessarily imply that satisfactory integration of women has taken place. Industrial and occupational segmentation of women and men still exists. By and large, women are concentrated in industries such as textiles, electronics, food processing, etc. Where they are considered more productive than men in unskilled and semi-skilled operations requiring dexterity and nimble fingers. Few are found in the modern industrial sector where higher levels of skills and technological know-how are required.

Within industries where women predominate, there is also a tendency for them to be located at the lower ranks of work and assigned monotonous and mechanical processes on the production line, where wages are low and opportunities for skill training and upward mobility limited. For these women workers, the effects of automation and fluctuations in the international markets are often more visible than men. As factories retrench staff, the women are usually the first ones to be affected. Thus in countries affected by downturn in world markets, women account for a disproportionate share of the unemployed.

Also in spite of significant increases in employment in select industries along with improvements in real wage rates of women workers such developments have failed to bring about significant improvements in the structure of wage disparity between gender groups. Thus in the most developed ESCAP countries where women's rights have progressed furthest, there still exists wide wage differentials between male and female

workers in the same occupational category with women in some countries earning less than half that of men.

**Table 4 : Female Wages in Manufacturing as Percentage of Male in Selected Countries, 1980 and 1985.**

Country	1980	1985
Australia(1)	78.6	79.4
Hong King(2)	N. A.	81.0
Japan(3)	43.6	42.1
Republic of Korea(3)	45.1	46.7
New Zealand(1)	71.4	70.5
Singapore(2)	61.5	63.4

(1) Earnings per hour

(2) Rates per day

(3) Earnings per month

Source : ESCAP, Compendium of Social Development Indicators in the ESCAP Region, 1989, p. 122.

These disparities not only appear to have been quite consistently maintained but in some sectors have worsened in the period for which data is available. (See Table 4). In Japan between 1975 and 1985 in a number of sectors such as manufacturing, mining and construction, the average wages of women workers remained at less than 50% of those for men. Specifically within the manufacturing sector the ratio of disparity widened from 48% to 42% during the same period. In South Korea, there have been significant real wage increases throughout the 1970's and 1980's for both male and female workers. However that of the females continued to lag behind the males. In manufacturing, women's wages in 1985 remained at less than 50% of those of male workers. In both Japan and South Korea the process of industrialisation seems to have reinforced the gender disparity in wage structure which were already quite conspicuous in these economies.



Developments have been more encouraging in Hong Kong and Singapore. In Hong Kong where the gender disparity was found to be the lowest among the ESCAP countries, the wage differential between male and female workers within the manufacturing sector had improved marginally between 1980 and 1985, with women workers on the average getting about 81% of males' wage in 1985. In Singapore also the differential tended to narrow during 1980 to 1985, especially within the transportation and construction sectors. In the manufacturing and mining sectors while there has been some improvement the differential between female and male wages remained quite wide during the 1980's. Within the manufacturing sector, women workers on the average received only 63.4% of the wages paid to their male counterparts in 1985.

**Table 5 : Women in Administrative and Managerial Position  
Selected Countries, Various Years.**

Country or Area	Year	Administrators and Managerial Workers		
		Total (thousands)	Total (thousands)	Percentage of Women
Hong Kong	1985	86.5	10.8	12.5
Indonesia	1982	39.0	4.0	10.3
Japan	1985	2,110.0	140.0	6.6
Republic of Korea	1985	218.0	8.0	3.7
Singapore	1985	65.9	13.1	19.9
Sri Lanka	1984	16.5	1.8	10.9
Thailand	1982	406.7	80.4	19.8

Source : United Nations, *1989 World Survey*, p. 141.

The occupational distribution of women has accounted in part for their lower level of income in manufacturing and elsewhere in the economy. Table 5 shows the poor representation of women in administrative and managerial positions and the wide gap existing between the position of men and women.

These shortcomings of the existing patterns of integration of women in industry in the Asia-Pacific region - their concentration in lower-skilled occupations in industries, their vulnerability to job loss and their lower rate of remuneration compared to males - can be traced in part to the way in which they have been incorporated into national policies and programmes of economic and social development in the past and more specifically to their limited participation in education and training programmes, particularly those related to skill development. The following section will show more clearly how the disadvantaged situation of women has emerged in Malaysia.

### **3. Malaysia : National Policies and Planning**

Although early Malaysian development plans have not contained specific sections devoted to the consideration of women, the government has acknowledged the significant contribution by women to overall national development. For example, in 1976 the government established the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWID) with links to the Department of the Prime Minister. The Secretariat for Women's Affairs (HAWA) was set up in 1983 to monitor and evaluate services for women provided by the public and private sectors and to function as secretariat to NACIWID. Among its objectives, the NACIWID aims to raise the consciousness of women regarding their roles and responsibilities in development as well as their rights. The present Sixth Malaysia Plan shows a stronger commitment to women's development in that it contains an entire chapter which, while taking cognizance of the multiplicity of women's roles in the family, society and economy, provides for specific strategies to integrate women in the process of development. Furthermore, the formulation of the National Policy for Women in 1989 reflects this developmental emphasis for among its overall objectives, the NPW aims to ensure equitable

sharing in the acquisition of resources and information as well as access to opportunities and benefits of development for both men and women as well as to integrate women in all sectors of national development, in line with their abilities and needs.

Various ministries have undertaken women programmes in areas within the context of their responsibilities. The National Population and Family Development Board, for instance, has extended its scope to activities aimed at raising the standard of living of its target group as has the Federal Land Development Authority and Rubber Industry Smallholders' Development Agency which has implemented income-generating activities for women through the promotion of training and financial assistance.

### **Assessment of Policies and Planning**

Women education has shown marked improvement during the past two decades with almost near parity rates at the elementary levels although tapering off more rapidly than for men at subsequent higher levels. Although they still lagged behind the corresponding percentages for boys, more girls are going to schools and over the 1970-1990 period, female enrolment in the technical stream increased markedly from 4.3% to 35.9%.

At the same time, there is a tendency for students of both sexes to pursue fields of study conforming to socially defined feminine and masculine roles. Thus female vocational students predominantly study such service trades as hotel management, catering, beauty care and tailoring. Female intake into universities constitute about 44% of the total intake during the Fifth Plan period (1986-1990). Although female students are making inroads into areas such as medicine, dentistry, engineering, architecture and accountancy, women still cluster in arts and education. One discouraging trend is that the rate of dropouts for girls in the rural areas has been as high as 40% (as compared to the national

average of 20%). Overall more girls drop out than boys.

In non-formal education, Family and Home Development programmes form the basic programmes directed at rural women. Under the programme, basic home economic education is provided and since 1963, it has served as the basis for training and education, especially of rural women. Non-formal vocational and technical training is mainly the responsibility of the government. Among the agencies involved are the Ministry of Labour and Manpower Industrial Training Institutes, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, National Youth Development Corps, MARA Vocational Training Institutes, Ministry of Social Welfare and the National Association of Women's Institutes.

Development programmes and policies for women have for the most part concentrated on their role as mothers and their welfare needs. Such programmes have involved mainly welfare services and instruction in nutrition, child care and home economics. On the relatively rare occasions when income-generating agricultural and other productive skills have been attempted, the projects have originated from welfare concerns and as such were not based on socio-economic needs. Because of this welfare approach, women have been doubly jeopardised; firstly, because welfare programmes receive only a small portion of the development funds and allocations for skilled human resources and, secondly, because once they are labeled "welfare programme cases", they are excluded from the broader range of programmes that help them become more productive.

### **Economic Participation**

The female labour force has been growing in tandem with the rapid economic development of the country and now only lags slightly behind its male counterpart, the participation rate increasing from 37% in 1970 to 46.7% in 1990. In terms of occupational structure, women are largely concentrated in low-skilled, labour intensive jobs in the agricultural

sector and in low-paying, semi-skilled, assembly-type production operations in the industrial sector. Among the variables which determine female participation in the labour force are :

(1) Marital Status and Family : Women tend to work between the time they leave school and the time they have their first baby. Participation rate among currently married women is lower than unmarried for all ethnic groups. This may possibly be due to social constraints as well as family commitment.

(2) Age and educational level, and residence : The employment rate for those with tertiary education is highest, followed by those with no formal education and primary education. The majority of the unemployed are in the younger age group (15-25 years) who possess secondary education and are rural in origin. One probable explanation is that the number of females with tertiary education is small and can thus be easily absorbed. As for those with no formal education, it is likely that the majority for them are employed in the agricultural sector while the majority of those with primary education are employed in unskilled or low-skilled jobs in the industrial sector.

(3) Establishment of the export-oriented industrialisation programme : This has been responsible for the rapid growth in women's labour force participation ; for instance, female employment in manufacturing industries increased from 8.1% in 1970 to 24.3% in 1990. In the labour intensive industries such as textiles and electronics, women comprised as much as 57% of all workers. However, a survey in 1988 indicated that more than half of the female workers were in low-paying, semi skilled jobs in production operations, compared with only 17.7% in technical and supervisory occupations and 10.9% in managerial and professional positions. Malay women form a significant proportion of the manufacturing labour force. In relation to female workers of other ethnic groups, the Malay female factory workers had a higher growth rate than the Chinese women and in 1979 stood at 46.5% of the total employed females. The majority

of these women are rural-urban migrants. In the public sector, female employment increased from 29.3% of the total employment in 1985 to 32.9% in 1990. Women are largely concentrated in the lower categories (primary school teachers, nurses, office and clerical workers, and unskilled general workers) and in the traditional female occupations.

The broader economic participation of women has not necessarily assured them of higher economic status. In absolute terms the income of women workers has improved only slightly. The percentage of women earning less than M\$375 per month decreased from 92.3% in 1979 to 89.7% 1980. The effectiveness of legislative stipulations of equal pay for women is still limited and sexual inequality in wages for the same employment persists in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. The incidence of unemployment among women continues to be higher than that of men in every age group in both the rural and urban areas. Female workers were particularly vulnerable during the economic downturn in the mid-1980's as they were concentrated in industries that were severely affected by the recession. At the height of the recession, about two-thirds of retrenched workers were predominantly female from the textiles and electronics industry.

The ability of women workers on their own to redress inequalities in wages and opportunities for both work and skills training is clearly limited and much greater efforts need to be made by the government. In particular there is a need for the public sector to dispel myths and change current social attitudes towards women's work and to demonstrate to women, family and society the benefits of providing women the full range of rights and skills that are commensurate with their various abilities. Women also need to be allowed access to training to make their work more skilled and productive.

#### **4. Problems and Constraints in Designing Effective National Policies and Programmes for Advancing and Integrating Women in Industry in Malaysia**

The national experience discussed in the earlier section clearly shows that Malaysia as with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region faces many problems and constraints when seeking to design effective national policies and programmes that can advance and integrate women in the economy generally, and in industry in particular. These problems and constraints are discussed in greater detail in this section.

##### **A. Socio-Cultural Constraints**

Socio-cultural factors continue to constitute one of the chief barriers that mitigate against women's full advancement and integration in industry. Despite mass mobilisation of women into industry in Malaysia, traditional views of women persist, resulting in their conditions of employment and career needs not being given sufficient attention by planners and employers. This, in turn, has affected women's own behaviour in the labour market.

Women are still associated by and large with their reproductive role and their employment is considered by planners, employers and society generally as secondary both to men's employment as well to their own role of reproduction. This pervasive view of women as a supplementary earner affects the way women workers are employed, how they are trained, classified, organised and what kind of work they do. Moreover, the expectation that women's working life will be terminated or interrupted by marriage and periodic childbearing makes employers hesitant to employ them, and after employment, reluctant to promote them to more important jobs or invest in skill training to upgrade them.

Sexual stereotypes of women being weaker than men and less techni-

cally oriented, often reinforced by the media, has also encouraged and perpetuated unfair or discriminatory practices against women workers. Even in the more developed sectors where women participation in management and industry is highest, they are integrated into the lower ranks of industrial work where they come under male supervision and have little decision-making rights over the conditions or organisation of their work. Stereotyping also promotes a form of occupational segregation whereby industry itself is divided between "feminised" industries (for example, textile, garments, electronics, where work is defined as unskilled or semi-skilled and career development is limited) and higher waged industries which employ mostly men. A consequence of this segregation is that independent of actual skill, productivity or efficiency levels, women earn only between 40-80% of men's wages in manufacturing in Malaysia.

Women, on the other hand, often respond to their limited employment opportunities and expectations of a short work-life by investing less in their own education and training than men do. They may be reluctant to accept promotions to more responsible jobs which they feel may conflict with their reproductive role.

Many women also prefer part-time work as a means of accommodating what is commonly regarded as the still more important reproduction or domestic role. If they work full-time, the additional demands of the reproductive or housewife role may result in fatigue and lower productivity at the work-place.

#### **B. Past Policy and Planning**

In the past the efforts of the Malaysian government have mainly been focused on the legal and legislation levels so as to create the basis for equality between the sexes and the promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment for women workers. This Malaysia has implemented equality in payment for men and women workers in the public sector.



At the more specific level of policy and planning to promote the integration of women in industry, comparable efforts have been lacking. Because women are usually not involved in decision-making at the policy level and because of the lack of strong women-based pressure groups, the tendency is for women to be accorded little recognition by national planning agencies in matters of human resources development such as employment, and training. This has allowed some discriminatory practices and occupational segregation to continue.

Also, because no well-defined policies on women's development exist (despite the Malaysian government's endorsement of the United Nations resolution on integrating women in the development process) women's rate of participation and integration into industry is largely if not entirely left to market forces. The problem in Malaysia is compounded by the fact that the most compelling force for industrialisation has been the country's supply of cheap labour. Technological advances in developed countries have allowed an international system of labour to emerge, geared towards recruiting workers from outside. Industries have also been relocated to gain access to new markets that would otherwise have been affected by import restrictions. The manner in which workers, especially women have been employed by some of these industries has made them especially vulnerable. The effect of an overcrowded labour market during periods of economic downturn has made it worse. Invariably women have been paid the lowest and are the first to lose their jobs in times of recession.

#### **C. Lack of Unionism and Women's Awareness of their Rights.**

Integration of women into the economy at all levels requires the acts of mobilisation of the female workers themselves in order to articulate grievances and resolve problems. This calls for an awareness of their basic rights and the ability and opportunity to organise themselves. Yet women comprise a disproportionately low proportion of the total mem-

bership in trade unions in Malaysia. This lack of involvement has been ascribed to their relative inexperience in labour unionism, their preoccupation with household tasks, sex discrimination by the union leadership, and their own apathy, arising from their conception of formal employment as a transient phase in their lives, not as a lifetime commitment. In addition the Malaysian Government frowns on active unionism, including women unionism, in order to attract more foreign investment.

#### D. Education and Training

The growth of industry has placed greater emphasis on formal education and certificates. This development has placed many females at a greater disadvantage compared to males. In poor households where cost of education is a constraint, the tendency is to spend more on boys' education while girls are expected to stay at home to help with housework. It is true that state policies of free education (especially at primary level) have made educational resources more available for the female population at large, but such policies have not necessarily guaranteed equitable utilisation of those opportunities by sex. Related schooling expenses, such as for textbooks and school uniforms, discourage hard-pressed families from educating their daughters. Even if these factors are eliminated, the opportunity cost to the family in terms of the contribution of daughters to household activities has discouraged many parents from sending female children to school. Thus when formal education and certificates are used as screening mechanisms for job allocation, females find themselves at the bottom of the industrial hierarchy.

Bias in the educational system especially manifests itself in terms of its objectives: that is, the type of training schools are supposed to provide and the knowledge they try to inculcate into the minds of the young. Vocational training institutions have low intake rates of women and where there are sizable women intakes, they are generally confined to trades such as typing, tailoring, embroidery and household crafts, beauty

culture, etc., which have limited market value and carry lower status in the economy. Generally too, vocational trainers have a negative attitude towards imparting skills to women, which hinder them further from obtaining equal opportunity and treatment. The lack of female trainers in non-traditional areas also hampers the training of women in newer occupations.

Opportunities for training outside the formal educational system are limited as there is a general shortage of training facilities and support system in Malaysia. Few trainers are willing to work in remote rural areas owing to lack of basic amenities. Training institutions, often located in major towns, often lack support services such as hostels and child-care centres. This greatly discourages female participation. Moreover, cultural and religious restrictions on Muslim women's mobility reinforce this problem. Even where training facilities are available, the burden and drudgery of housework tend to inhibit women from taking advantage of training opportunities. The tendency of employers to hire women in traditionally female occupations, mainly in unskilled jobs, is yet another disincentive for women to undertake training programmes in non-traditional and more skilled occupations.

Pervasive sexual division of labour and attitudinal constraints of parents, society-at-large and these women themselves often reinforce this problem, resulting in few women being trained in higher level skills and technology. This is most clearly seen with regard to the choice of study at advanced levels. More often than not, the subjects chosen by the girls are those considered as 'suitable' for women such as home economics, humanities, social science and art. The number of girls enrolled in natural sciences in Malaysia generally is limited. Accordingly, the number of trained and qualified women available in fields requiring competence in subjects such as engineering, technology, and high-level scientific laboratory work, remains very low.

The evidence suggests that even where there is no legal discrimina-

tion against women's access to educational opportunities, women in general do not take full advantage of available opportunities, either because they are not sufficiently motivated or are not aware of their own potential. Women are thus relegated to less challenging and less paying occupations.

#### **E. Employers' Perceptions of Women Workers.**

In the past in Malaysia many private sector employers (and public sector ones as well) have tended to view women as a dispensable workforce and consequently were not motivated to take initiatives to train women and upgrade their employment. Women were generally considered to be less productive than men because of their perceived higher absenteeism or turnover rate, and more costly because of maternity leave, etc. Many employers saw no serious need for providing support services such as child-care centres or training for the working women to strengthen their involvement in employment. The outcome was for many women to leave the workforce after marriage or after the first child birth. Re-entry into the labour market is less frequent than in developed countries where the 'M' curve is found to operate. Although these negative views of women workers have begun to change (in particular within the foreign-dominated and export-oriented electronic industry which employ a high proportion of women workers, and where it is recognised that companies have to continually enhance their technological and skill level to remain internationally competitive) they are still widely prevalent amongst many employers.

### **5. Role Of Public and Private Sector Organisation in Developing Human Resource Development Programmes**

In the previous sections, we discussed the Malaysian experience with respect to the integration of women in the economy and the constraints

and problems arising from attempts to incorporate into action-oriented plans and programmes. In this section, we will discuss the roles that various public and private sector organisations can play in fostering diversified skill development for women in industry.

#### **Public Sector Organisations.**

The role of public sector organisations in developing plans and programmes for fostering diversified skill development for women in industry can be seen in three inter-related spheres :

- the legal and legislative sphere aimed at creating the basis for equality between the sexes and the promotion of equality of opportunity and treatment for women workers ;
- the educational sphere aimed at removing the disadvantages and barriers to education that women encounter on gender grounds that subsequently inhibit their participation in the economy ;
- the economic sphere in which the public sector is an employer of women as well as the formulator and implementor of national policies and plans of employment and development that affect all groups in society, including women.

##### **(1) The Legal and Legislative Sphere**

In the legal and legislative sphere, although Malaysia has initiated important reforms through anti-discrimination legislation, these actions have generally fallen short of specific recommendations for positive measures to rectify existing sexual disparities affecting women. A good example of how such an affirmative action programme might be developed can be seen in the Australian Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act of 1986 which requires trade unions and private sector employers with more than 100 employees, and universities and advanced education institutions to develop and implement affirmative action programmes to ensure that appropriate action is taken to eliminate discrimination and to promote equal opportunities for

women in relation to employment matters. The Act requires bodies and employers to report on their activities related to development to the Director of Affirmative Action. The Director is charged with advising and assisting employers to develop and implement such programmes, including training programmes, monitor reports received from employers, evaluate effectiveness of the programmes and promote understanding and acceptance of affirmative action to achieve equal employment opportunities for women (1989, World Survey, pp. 266-267). Without similar resources and relevant machinery to implement legislative provisions as in the Australia case, Malaysia might well find its achievements in sexual equality to fall short of their intentions.

## (2) The Educational Sphere

Effective public sector programmes in education and training, especially at the higher levels, can provide the key to successful participation of women in the economy generally and in industry specifically. Here it may be noted that women's access to education and participation in specific educational programmes geared towards the modern sector of the economy has improved in numerical terms during the past decade such that a gap between male-female enrolment does not exist. Developing plans and programs that can address the qualitative rather than quantitative dimension should continue to be a priority.

At the same time the Malaysian government has recently modified its educational policies to emphasise the development of vocational and technical education which can substantially enhance the individual's employment prospects, especially in industrial occupations. Such policies include programmes for establishment of new technical and vocational schools, rehabilitation of existing ones and the provision of opportunities to school leavers to enable them to transfer to vocational and technical schools to learn more employable skills. What is lacking, however, in the emerging recognition of the importance of vocational and technical education is a concern for female participation. Although few

statistics are available regarding male/female enrollment in vocational and technical education, there is good reason to believe that female enrollment is considerably lower than male due to various factors, including traditional social attitudes that women are less suited to technical and vocational employment. Even when women are able to participate in vocational or technical training programmes, such programmes tend to be of shorter duration than men's and to emphasise job sectors such as sewing, home economics and stenography where wages are relatively low and skills are less marketable.

### (3) The Economic Sphere

In some parts of the country employment in government agencies or parastatal industries has been an important source of employment for women. However, no studies are available which analyse the role of the public sector industries in developing plans and programmes leading to diversified skill development for women. Such studies are urgently needed, especially since the Malaysian government has begun to close down or sell off public sector industries in an effort to rebalance the role of the public and private sectors. Women workers tend to be over-represented when the workers from affected industries are retrenched as they tend to be less skilled than men. Hence the provision of retraining and skill development programmes especially geared towards women workers in public sector industries would help to correct the gender bias found in this economic restructuring exercise.

Besides reviewing the skill diversification programmes of public and private industries, government could also review the incentives provided to enterprises in Economic Processing Zones (EPZ's) and Free Trade Zones (FTZ's) which are an important contributor to jobs for women in industry. This review could also focus on the skill development needs of workers in these enterprises and the various conditions and incentives necessary to stimulate programmes, especially geared towards women.

## Private Sector Organisations

### (1) Private Sector Enterprises

In Malaysia the private sector has been the main source of industrial growth and a more significant contributor to the creation of employment opportunities for women than the public sector. This has been especially noticeable in export-oriented, labour-incentive industries where the ratio of females to all employees has been estimated at over 80% (ESCAP, Economic and Social Survey 1988, p.121).

Although women have primarily been valued for their dexterity in low skill, highly standardized and repetitive work in these enterprises, evidence exists that there has been an upgrading of the skilled of women employed in some enterprises, particularly in the FTZ's. This upgrading has come about as a result of the change in the nature of industries in some of these high-growth countries responding to market forces and progressing from simple assembly work to more sophisticated processes involving greater automation.

Whilst female workers have benefited from the implementation of firm-specific development and modernisation programmes, it should be noted that these benefits have accrued to them because they are part of the available human resources of the firm and not, it would appear, as an outcome of any programme of skill development specially developed for women as a target group.

Although past experience indicates that there are clear limits to the extent to which private sector companies in Malaysia will respond to calls for skill development programmes specifically for women in industry, the use of tax and other policy incentives can go a long way in creating the right environment for companies engaged in sectors that contain a high proportion of female employment to initiate and organise such programmes.

A good example of this can be seen in Penang's experience in industrial change and human resources development. In the early 1970's, the



state government of Penang decided to embark on a course of industrialisation through the establishment of FTZ's for the assembly of integrated circuits and electronic components. Since then, progress has been remarkable with the GDP of the manufacturing sector growing from \$101 million in 1970 to \$2,668 million in 1990 and the number of factories increasing from 31 in one industrial estate in 1970 to 503 factories in 4 industrial estates and 4 FTZ's, as well as 350-400 small to medium sized factories outside in 1990. Workers employed during the period increased from 2,784 in 1970 to 114,771 in 1990. A major part of Penang's industrial success can be attributed to the rapid emergence of a relatively growing, female industrial workforce with the following attributes :

- (a) exposure to modern/high technology environment ;
- (b) acquisition of increasingly sophisticated skills, including automation ;
- (c) adoption of industrial work discipline ;
- (d) adoption of concepts and processes of quality and excellence (QCC, zero defect, etc.).

At the same time, attractive fiscal incentives and an efficient government administration, especially through a one-stop agency in charge of planning approvals and development of the industrial estates, have helped.

For the future, the key to further growth in Penang is seen to lie in accelerated human resources development and higher applications and innovations in technology. The formal education system is to provide basic skills for workers (the 3Rs, including computer skills), but it is also recognised as being constrained by inherent rigidities in the teaching personnel, administrative structure and procedures. Thus more emphasis is being placed on harnessing the initiatives and ingenuity of the private sector to provide a wide range of training programmes with flexibility to cater to the diverse and changing needs of the manufacturing sector. One major initiative is the recent establishment of a Skill Development Center to train skilled industrial workers, including women.

(2) Non-Government Organisations (NGO's)

NGO's consist of many different organisations, some of which focus on wage lobbying to improve the conditions and terms of work of women workers. Service providers, research centers, trade unions and women's advocacy groups are in an advantageous position to influence policy makers regarding constraints preventing women from participating in skill development programmes because of their experience and contact with the grassroots and greater sensitivity to local conditions. Trade union NGO's, in particular, have an important role to play since they can represent the interests of their female workforce in a wide range of issues, including their needs for skill development. Despite their concern, it is unlikely that NGO's in Malaysia can play more than a sensitising role in the development of skill training plans and programmes for women. Due to their lack of independent resources to operate such programmes as well as lack of expertise in gauging market needs, NGO's would do well to confine their role to collaborating with other public and private sector organisations in organising such programmes. An innovative example has been pioneered by AMU, an agency of the Swedish Ministry of Labour which operates through a network of regional branches and local centres with the assistance of trade unions to train men and women to meet the specific needs of employers. To redress the disadvantages that women face at the labour market, special one to five months courses including teaching of theory and practical training have been developed to initiate women into non-traditional areas of industry. Course modules also aim to equip women with skills in basic economics, marketing and entrepreneurship, thus qualifying them to fill up middle-level and leadership positions in industry.

Besides playing a major role in industry as workers, women also have a potentially important role as entrepreneurs. In some parts of the Asian region, women with resources and initiative have made successful inroads into the hitherto male-dominated world of entrepreneurship in the infor-

mal sector. In the formal sector, less inroads have been made by the entry of women. With both the formal and informal sector economy, special skill and entrepreneurship training programmes can provide a spring-board to assist women in Malaysia to participate optimally in industrial development. However, such programmes would need to be combined with others such as credit provision if women are to be able to successfully engage in self-employment activities.

#### **6. Action-Oriented Schemes for Promoting Skill Development of Women Workers.**

Before discussing the design and details of the action-oriented promotional programmes for skill development of women workers, consideration should be given to a number of related or preparatory measures to ensure the correct policy and planning framework for the programme's successful implementation. These measures would include the following :

- (1) the need to sensitise national development policy makers and planners as well as private sector employers on the importance of female participation in the economy and in industry in particular ;
- (2) close co-ordination amongst the main development agencies in the country, including agencies dealing with sectoral concerns such as education, labour and industry as well as multi-sectoral agencies responsible for overall planning, programming, implementation and monitoring of developmental issues, to realise the goal of increasing the level of female participation in industry and fostering their skill development ;
- (3) the establishment of a comprehensive information system that would permit systematic and rapid collection, analysis and dissemination of data related to industry, the female labour force, participation of women in skill development programmed and other key

subject ;

- (4) the need to establish strong supportive measures aimed at the private sector to encourage investment in industry. These measures would include investment incentives to encourage new technology upgrading, diversification and new activities in high value added products. Other supportive measures are the promotion of stable labour management relations, substantial public investments in education and training, especially of technically skilled labour and provision of an efficient infrastructure.

Once the correct policy and planning framework is in place, it would be easier to design various types of skill development schemes for women. These schemes would differ in a number of ways, including in their objectives, the target groups they are aimed at, for example, young unemployed, currently employed or those threatened with unemployment, the sponsors or organisers of the schemes, the content of the training, etc. The two schemes proposed below should be regarded as prototypes, from which useful ideas are to be derived to assist the country in planning further its promotional schemes.

- (1) Promoting Women's Participation in Public Sector Training Institutions

This scheme aims at institutionalising gender concerns into the training programmes and activities of vocational and technical institutions in the country. It will initially be organised around the establishment of a special task force of experts drawn from the public and private sectors, including educationists, industrialists and policy makers and planners. The task force would be responsible for making recommendations to the government on ways to enhance women participation in vocational and technical institutions through appropriate changes in the course structure, curricula, training methodology and related areas, that would be in keeping with the future industrial and technical skill needs of the country.

The task force would appoint groups of specialists with professional knowledge and expertise to oversee specific technical outputs of the scheme, including development of prototype materials and mechanisms for incorporating gender considerations into the curricula and training programmes of vocational and technical institutions. This would also include models for training, data, etc. that would be more suitable to women trainees in the institutions but that are presently unavailable.

The task force would also be provided with the latest available data on existing levels of women's participation in various sub-sectors of industry, quality and quantity of skills required for short and medium terms needs, likely changes in technology and industry, etc. To facilitate it in its work of arriving at concrete and viable recommendations, a special committee would be convened to organise the data and set up a gender-desegregated data base developed for utilisation by departments and agencies.

The final stage of the scheme would see the implementation of the recommendations of the task force through the testing and evaluation of guidelines, prototype training materials, new curricula, etc. Before their dissemination to relevant institutions in the form of a Plan of Action.

At the end of the scheme, the following objectives would have been obtained :

- (a) improved awareness of gender issues in vocational and technical training activities at the policy, planning and implementation level ;
- (b) greater co-operation and exchange of ideas between public and private sector organisations to ensure market-oriented programmes ;
- (c) more effective public sector training programmes targeted at women to enhance their level of participation in industry ;
- (d) gender-desegregated data system related to women in industry, their levels of participation, training needs, etc. which is integrated into the larger development system of the country.

(2) Promoting More Effective Skill Development Institutions for Women.

There have been criticisms in many countries that the existing vocational and industrial training institutions are not fully capable of meeting the skill demands of industry. This inadequacy is especially felt in women-oriented or dominated training institutions and may be due to their inability to cope with rapid changes of industrial technology, changes in the industrial structure of the economy as well as the lack of effective planning and development of their own programmes. When training programmes are not market-oriented, they affect the suitability and employability of the trainees and lead to skill mismatch. The resulting problem not only constraints female participation in the economy, but also adversely affects industrial expansion and employment growth since employers cannot obtain the necessary skilled women workers to increase their productive capacity.

The participation of the private sector in women training institutions is an important contributory factor to ensure the effectiveness of the women skill delivery system. Presently, the majority of Malaysian public sector women training institutions do not have effective formal linkages with private sector industry. The proposed programme aims at correcting this omission in involvement in a systematic way through a number of short-term measures to be implemented by women training institutions and by private sector industry. These measures include the following :

- (a) Establishment of industry-related projects for trainees from women's training institutions.
- (b) Adoption of women training institutions by industry through which industry can organise work visits, supply materials and equipment as well as conduct on-the-job training.
- (c) Assignment of experienced instructors from industry to the women'

- s training institutions for specialised training tasks.
- (d) Assistance by industry to women's training institutions in the development of standardised and relevant training materials and identification of right type of training equipment.
  - (e) Institution-industry collaboration to establish an effective evaluation system of curriculum, quality of trainees, etc. At the end of the programme, the following objectives would have been achieved :
    - (a) more efficient and effective women's training institutions producing trainees that are in demand in the market place ;
    - (b) Active industry involvement in assessing and identifying training needs and in the planning and implementation training policies and programmes of women's institutions ;
    - (c) higher quality of women workers with skill requirements for technology-intensive and growth industries.

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