

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Malaysia is experiencing an economic boom since 1988. The high growth of the economy was achieved with price stability and since 1995, with virtual full employment. The strong growth performance resulted in fundamental structural changes in the economy. There were accompanying changes in the composition of employment, and women's increasing participation in the growing manufacturing sector was noteworthy. There were accompanying sharp declines in poverty and high attainments in social indicators. Women's health situation improved considerably. Access to education expanded across all levels. Despite these achievements, gender issues remain important in the context of upgrading the capacity of human resources to meet future challenges. The female labor force participation rate still remains at 47 percent, well below the 86 percent participation rate for men. This and other issues related to women's employment, their capacity to meet the challenges emerging from the ongoing economic crisis, and prepare for future economic growth, really depends upon the preservation of gains made by Malaysian women in the areas of human development and employment, while addressing the need to further diversify their education and training, and improve their employment prospects in an increasingly technological society. Increasing women's participation in development is both an opportunity and challenge for Malaysia.

In an effort to reduce the gender gaps in economic participation and human resource development, the government promulgated the National Policy on Women in 1989. This policy articulates the needs, interests and situations of women and ensures that these concerns are included in mainstream development policy and programs with women participating as full and equal partners in development. Policy statements in the Government's Second Outline Perspective Plan (1991-2000) provide women with opportunities for economic participation as well as participation in education and training. The Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) contains a separate section on women, but in the sectoral chapters, the lack of gender-differentiated data and analysis is striking particularly in education, labor, and poverty chapters. The growing shortage of labor opens a wider avenue for women to move from unpaid to paid labor. The growth of the manufacturing sector places demands on well qualified and highly skilled persons, both men and women.

Despite these opportunities, it is suggested that the present scenario for economic participation and human resource development, which still appears to be skewed against women, be seriously analyzed before the labor shortage problem, especially of skilled labor, can be solved. Factors constraining the increased labor force participation of women have been discussed and measures for overcoming these constraints were suggested. They include, among others, compulsory education, expanded accessibility to vocational and technical education for women, upgrading of skills among employed women, national labor legislation supporting part-time employment, provision of child care facilities, gender neutral selection of employees for training, alleviation of wage discrimination in the private sector, elimination of gender stereotyping of domestic work, expanded accessibility to health facilities, and institutional strengthening of HAWA as the lead agent in the national machinery for integrating women in development. These measures will have far reaching implications not only on the socioeconomic status of women but on Malaysia's economy as it faces challenges in undergoing rapid industrialization process.

Training serves as one of the means of developing human resources. In this regard, one of the major insights of human capital theory is the observation that individuals can increase their productivity not only through investment in formal education but also by learning important work skills outside the formal school system.²⁴ Viewed from this perspective, women as active actors—in both the private and public spheres—should be trained with their male counterparts focusing not only on their domestic role but also on their productive role.

In order to meet the need for trained workers in technical and vocational field, as well as to fully integrate women in the development process, institutional and structural changes may be required in the education system to improve the output of education and training programs. More specifically, education programs at secondary as well as higher levels will have to be more oriented towards the needs for meeting the challenges of achieving an economically prosperous and a fully industrialized society. The design and implementation of education programs should be such that the prevailing problem of women preferring particular courses in education and training on account of social and structural factors, is resolved so that the larger proportion of available human resources could be integrated into the development process.

²⁴ Blau and Ferber, 1986.