

**Need for More Gender-sensitive Data in Economic Policy-making**  
by  
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Another milestone for Malaysian women was endorsed this year with the establishment of the Women and Family Development Ministry which paves the way for more effective representation of women's interest. While the overall economic position of women has improved over the years through increased access to education, employment and reduction in poverty levels, they, together with the poor, are the most vulnerable to the effects of external shocks in the form of commodity price collapse and changes in the terms of trade, economic recession, and adjustment policies adopted in response to these changes. This vulnerability may be due to their overwhelming representation in the policy area concerned, or where they play a critical producer, consumer or reproductive role.

In spite of the importance of these effects, there was a surprising lack of concern for women issues in economic policy-making in Malaysia, although the overall level of rhetoric and apparent activity had been high. There is no clearer evidence of this other than the dearth of data on women in official statistical production and analysis. Much of the economic policy had almost always been concerned with distributional issues along ethnic lines and socio-economic groups, rather than on gender-specific terms.

Broadly, there are two aspects to the problem of data availability. First is the lack of data or information owing to a paucity of material. This is especially acute in areas pertaining to female involvement in the development process, female participation in the business sector, political arena and the informal sector. Without this basic data, it is not surprising that time-series data sensitive enough to pick out the real impact of structural adjustments in the economy on women are hard to find. Such longitudinal data must cover a long enough period to be meaningfully analysed, thus separating the effects of structural adjustment policies from development change. In other words, one should be able to study cycles in the economy and how global as well as national adjustments affect women in both the short and long term.

Second is the problem of the limitations of available data. This inadequacy covers a number of areas. Most of the data like those pertaining to economic activities and ownership of business enterprises are not differentiated by sex. Instead, all the

categories are lumped together, rendering them quite inadequate in a study which is female specific.

Where the data are sex specific, a host of other problems emerge. The classifications of the groups may be too general to make the analysis meaningful. For example, some of the occupational categories are so broad that even though they are sex differentiated, only limited analysis can be done. Where time series data have been available, they are often of too short a period to meaningfully indicate a trend. Also, in the use of time series data, a recurrent problem has been the changing of classifications, making comparisons extremely difficult, if not totally inappropriate.

Clearly, there is a need for gender-specific data to be collected, compiled and analysed more assiduously by the statistical authorities. A data base on women need to be established to analyse and monitor the effects of structural adjustment policies, and to provide the basis for planning the incorporation of women in Malaysia's future development. One crucial area is women in poverty groups. While data concerning women among the poor are not available, it is safe to infer, since poverty is mainly a household phenomenon, that women will be well represented amongst the poverty groups. Poverty, though vastly improved, is still a problem, affecting some 6.8 per cent of total households in Malaysia in 1997. Women among the rural poor are usually adversely affected by falling commodity prices, and along with those in urban areas, doubly from cutbacks in government expenditure and transfers such as expenditure subsidies and income maintenance schemes.

Another priority area, especially due to the present phase of economic development and the changing labour conditions after the recession, is that women in the factories be given special attention. In particular, issues of labour education, women in the union movement and the problem of marginalisation of women workers on the shop floor as a result of technology conversion, adds a new dimension of discrimination against women in the labour market. It is important that labour unions, even in-house unions, should have special programmes to lobby management and government to pay greater attention to this problem, especially in training and retraining schemes as well as in wage compensation and benefits. It is, therefore, crucial that women's groups be utilised into an effective lobby for incorporating more gender-sensitive policies and programmes to resolve women's problems in the adjustment process and in the longer term development policies.

Women are often strongly represented as agricultural and home-based workers. The direct impact of agricultural modernisation programmes on the position of women in

agriculture is obvious. This is especially relevant not only for women workers in traditional and smallholder agriculture, but also in the plantations where women are heavily represented. Rural development programmes should continue to stress expanding opportunities for increasing the sources of off-farm incomes through rural small-scale industry. The promotion of income-generating activities is a priority question in the longer-term adjustment programmes and policies of the government. A community-oriented approach would also complement the policy adjustments needed to cater to the needs of this segment of female labour. The fuller utilisation of female labour time will enhance family incomes. Dual income families are the norm, rather than an exception, these days.

Economic liberalisation, as part of Malaysia's adjustment strategy since the recession of 1985, had been carried out cautiously, but most evidently in promoting export-oriented manufacturing. This strategy also calls for the acceleration of the flow of foreign investment, particularly in the areas of small- and medium-scale enterprises. The question of greater employment security, especially in the new manufacturing industries, is an important women issue in Malaysia.

Social welfare programmes are often affected by government austerity measures to cope with deficits. Women are particularly at risk when such actions involve the area of maternal and child health. Fortunately, this item of social spending was not greatly affected by the budget-balancing programme of the government during the recession.

Another important area is the impact of technology development on women. There is a tendency for sex selectivity which biases against the increased participation of women in training schemes which aggravates the labour-shedding practices due to technology upgrading, as well as the possible displacement due to office automation, that is already apparent in some firms and industries. In fact, over the years, rapid conversions have occurred in the electronics and textile sectors, as Malaysia's export platform industries adopt higher tech production methods, and other Malaysian manufacturers introduce more efficient techniques for more value-added, particularly so during an economic recovery process. Thus, a technology development policy should appropriately be more gender-sensitive and faithfully implemented to overcome these problems.

On the whole, the government's commitment to longer term economic restructuring in the new millenium will likely continue to have an impact on different segments of the female population in Malaysia. Hence, there is a need to insist on continued and

greater sensitivity to the potential consequences economic policies may have on women in this country.