

The bigger picture: Malaysia's gender perspective in Covid recovery

As Malaysia rebounds, it is crucial for a gender perspective in all recovery efforts and policies, say experts. Economically, women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

Single mum Sara recently lost her job in a nursing care facility because she needed to take time off to care for her seven year old child. The little girl was diagnosed with hand foot and mouth disease and had to be quarantined at home for five days. With no one else to look after her sick child, Sara asked her employer for leave. She was, instead, dismissed.

"My employer said that they could not afford to keep someone who was consistently asking for time off. This was because a few months before, I also needed to take a few days off as my nine year old son fell and broke his wrist. But what can I do? I don't have family here in KL ... I can't afford daycare," says Sara, who fled from her abusive husband during the first movement control order in March 2020.

She sought refuge with the Women's Aid Organisation's shelter for a few months and, with the support of social workers, learnt some skills and built herself up enough to be able to live on her own with her three children.

She still lives in fear of being tracked down by her abusive husband, whom she says has been harassing her siblings. Since she lost her job,

Sara has been selling vegetables at various night markets in and around her housing area.

Though she is afraid of running into her ex-husband, she needs to go out to work to put food on the table.

"I can earn about RM400 a week if I sell vegetables every day. But, sometimes, like when my daughter had to be quarantined, I could not work so that week, we struggled. I make barely enough to pay for my rent and the money for the transporter who sends my two older children to school.

"I would like to get a proper job but I don't know what employer will accept me. I cannot work long hours because there is no one to look after my children," she says.

This, says WAO's services director, Charlene Murray, is the reality of many women – women who have escaped violence and abuse, single mothers, or women in B40 communities.

The vulnerable segments of society, she says, are struggling to cope even though recovery from the pandemic is ongoing.

"The ability to secure a job, and we are looking at jobs such as cashiers, service crew and so on, is just harder for women. There is just a lot of competition out there for the same jobs and although companies are not deliberately choosing to hire men over women, the preference might be present because mothers are not able to work the long hours ... They still have to care for their children and so on.

"Up until a month or so ago, before children went back to physical school fully, the responsibility of caring for children at home fell on mothers. How on earth are they able to take a full time job? What more if their children fall sick," says Murray.

A gender lens

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the workforce and, unsurprisingly, women have been hit harder. Data from around the world, including data specifically for Malaysia clearly indicates this disparity.

Even before the pandemic, Malaysian women have been less represented in the workforce than men. And although there were small gains seen in 2019 and early 2020, the pandemic has obliterated those gains, experts say.

There are many reasons for this. In 2020, the International Labour Organisation reported that women in Malaysia are highly represented in the high risk sector of manufacturing and services which were industries that were worst hit by the pandemic.

Also, as of 2020, women represent 43.7% of the informal sector, where 77% of the total informal sector are own-account holders, according to data from the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DSOM)**.

And, as schools stayed sealed since the movement control order, women have had to bear additional domestic work on top of their professional responsibilities. According to two recent grassroots research and development programmes, financial instability plagues the low-income groups whose socio-economic situation requires dual incomes to sustain the household, says Omna.

"However, structural barriers persist particularly for women who disproportionately experience poverty due to challenges they face in entering the workforce such as juggling care and household responsibilities among other barriers," she highlights.

A blog post titled Care Work in the Time of Covid-19: Women's Unpaid Care Burden in Four Charts (part of UNDP Malaysia's Kisah series) reports that the pandemic "has exposed many societal shortcomings, especially inequalities, and is likely to increase poverty at a global scale". One issue flagged was a disproportionate increase in the caregiving burden experienced by women. The return to normal for the workforce, the writers warned, will be experienced abnormally by many primary caregivers. "In the long term, how care is distributed within the household has a far-reaching impact on women's economic participation in the world of income-generating activities. A prolonged family crisis will often force women to give up paid employment as they struggle to juggle work and care responsibilities.

"The **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**'s Quarterly Labour Force Statistics for Q1 2020 reinforces this point. We are witnessing the highest number of persons leaving the labour force in recent times. In the same period, most persons leaving the labour force have cited 'housework/family' as the primary motivation. This could be due to the extra care burden that women in Malaysia have disproportionately incurred during the Covid-19 pandemic, but further research is needed to establish cause and effect," it said. There were solutions given: Gender-sensitive preparedness and policy responses that not only to reduce the burden on women, but also improve the effectiveness of government interventions and increased public investment in the formal care economy to reduce the burden of unpaid domestic care work – more social and care workers are needed in the country's health and social sector.

As the country has begun its recovery from the devastating impact of the pandemic, it is becoming evident that not every Malaysian has the equal opportunity to get back on their feet. Women, especially those from vulnerable segments of society – single mothers, women-headed households, victims of domestic violence – are finding it a struggle to find work that supports their basic needs.

But all is not lost and as countries build back after the devastation of the pandemic, there is a chance to build back stronger and equal. With borders now open and life slowly getting back to (old) normal, the outlook for economic recovery is positive. However, experts both in labour and gender, warn that recovery will also not favour women unless programmes are drawn up using a gender lens.

"When we talk about stimulus packages for recovery, it is not just the amount of the package that matters but where the resources are channeled to. Defining areas in which public expenditure could help address the gender impacts of the crisis is crucial, such as expending health coverage and income support, social protection measures and gender sensitive policies," said International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Employment Policies and Gender specialist Valeria Esquivelin in a podcast on the uneven recovery from the Covid-19 jobs crisis.

She added that this was crucial because, based on experiences from past crises, the longer women were out of the workforce, the harder it will be for them to go back. Murray agrees to that unless gender is incorporated in pandemic recovery strategies, vulnerable groups will struggle to cope.

"So far, there seems to be minimal effort to ensure in supporting women in recovery. Just telling everyone that they can go out to work and children can go back to school will not erase the effects of the pandemic for the last two years. Things won't just miraculously go back to what it was before," says Murray, point blank.

"For those in the middle class and above, it helps that things are going back to normal but for the B40, things are challenging. If there is any time for gender to be included in policies it is now because we are now seeing that the recovery process is actually having a negative effect on them. We are talking about single mums, survivors of violence, women-headed households and we aren't seeing initiatives to help these groups of people," she says.

Murray stresses that what the vulnerable need isn't cash aid but a leg up in finding work to sustain themselves for the long term.

"What they need isn't cash aid. The government could look at giving incentives for employers who hire single mums, those who give time off for mums, or provide child care services or allowances to enable these women to go out to work.

"We must make sure that the marketplace isn't about survival of the fittest; it must be supportive so these marginalised groups don't not lose out just because they have more responsibilities on their plate," she stresses.

Help women, help society

According to World Bank (2019), removing all economic barriers for women in Malaysia could boost Malaysia's income per capita by 26.2% translating to an annual income gain of RM9400 for individual, says Omna Seeni-Ong, founder and principal consultant of Engender Consultancy, a social enterprise that promotes gender equality and women's empowerment.

"Understanding who is bearing the burden of the crisis and what drives it is crucial for designing policies going forward. Post-pandemic, more working women may be forced to make the unenviable sacrifice of giving up paid employment altogether," says Omna.

While long-term solutions need to be formulated, some obvious solutions can and must be tackled more immediately, such as providing affordable, if not free, day care services to women so that they can go back to work.

"Grassroots communities have expressed the lack of affordable and accessible essential support services such as elder and childcare, which is a major impediment to women, limiting their work opportunities, forcing them to informal precarious employment, lower productivity and often poor health outcomes for the whole family," says Omna.

In rural communities in Sarawak, for example, work related challenges faced by men, women and families are mainly balancing work life balance, transportation and network accessibility, work-home travel and the lack of childcare facilities, she says.

"There are kindergarten and childcare centres, but most parents cannot afford to send their children to the available centres," she says.

The situation isn't too different in the peninsula.

"We need accessible community-based childcare by expanding Tabika Perpaduan and Tabika Transit Kemas for B40 urban and rural communities in PPR and low cost housing areas. "The centres should be based on the ratio of centre to population. For example, there are only two Tabika Perpaduan in Lembah Subang, a densely populated low cost housing area and only a fraction of the real population of children will benefit," says Omna, adding that the childcare provided by government agencies or government linked companies is insufficient and those provided by the private sector is dismal.

Subsidised childcare is provided by two main agencies – Tabika Perpaduan by the Jabatan Perpaduan Negara dan Integrasi Nasional for childcare and early childhood education for urban and semi-urban areas and Tabika Transit Kemas (after school childcare) by the Rural Development Ministry which provides early childhood education in rural areas.

There needs to be more of such centres.

Murray says that a more concerted effort by the government is needed. "At the end of the day, we can go back to work and school but what is being done to help the most vulnerable in society recover. Those who have lost out on so much in the past two plus years... If there isn't some form of help for them to safeguard their basic rights, they may never catch up," she concludes.

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