

WOMEN LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION: DO GENDER-ROLE ATTITUDES PLAY A PART?

Audrey K.L. Siah* and Sharon G.M. Koh

Department of Economics, School of Business, Monash University Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: audrey.siah@monash.edu

Published online: 30 April 2025

To cite this article: Audrey K.L Siah and Sharon G.M. Koh. 2025. Women labour force participation: Do gender-role attitudes play a part? *Kajian Malaysia* 43(1): 49–72. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.1.3>

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2025.43.1.3>

ABSTRACT

As much as data on the women's labour force participation (LFP) rate reveals, several issues remain puzzling. While the dominance of women in the manufacturing and service sectors is evident, the proportion of Malaysian women in the workforce is still lower when compared to neighbouring countries. This article utilises data from the World Values Survey to explore how one's attributes and gender-role attitudes affect women's LFP in Malaysia, given that empirical literature finds that women's LFP contributes to human capital empowerment and spurs economic growth. Our results suggest that individuals who hold traditional gender attitudes, in terms of "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay" will probably choose to refrain from the workforce. Other gender-role attitudes indicators are diluted by the Malaysian government's policies to encourage more women in the workforce. Our findings suggest a need to increase the return to skills to curtail the influence of traditional gender-role beliefs. This study provides useful insights to policymakers and employers in devising appropriate measures to increase women's economic empowerment.

Keywords: gender-role attitudes, women labour force participation rate, workforce participation gap, gender norms, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Over the past quarter century, there has been growing recognition of the significant role played by women in economic development. This recognition has led to development policies that have focused on increasing the role of women in the labour force. As Malaysia moves towards becoming a developed nation by 2025, the government has renewed calls to increase gender diversity through more family-friendly policies. Moreover, the country is moving towards more considerable technological advancement¹ and moving away from being a resource-driven economy. It is widely believed that this drive will allow greater workplace flexibility, especially for women.

Malaysia has consistently recorded a low unemployment rate of, on average, 3.35% from 1991 until 2020 (World Development Indicators 2020) but is still lagging when it comes to women labour force participation (LFP). Even though women constitute half of the total population in the country, fewer than half of the women of working age are in the labour force. Increasing women's LFP not only contributes to higher growth but increases the country's productivity. This study investigates the workforce participation gap of women and concludes that gender-role attitudes play a major role. As such, our study adds to the ongoing research on the importance of personal attributes and gender-role attitudes in determining women's LFP. Even though our study focuses on the Malaysian context, these results have direct and indirect implications for emerging economies in Asia, which continue to hold on to traditional gender segregation.

The LFP rate in Malaysia is lower when compared to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia (Figure 1). It is anticipated that having more women in the workforce will spur economic growth since the household doubles as a production unit. Moreover, women are identified as "reliable, productive and cheap labour force which makes them the preferred workforce for textiles and electronic transnational companies" (Bradshaw, Castellino and Diop 2013, 5). However, economic growth has been approximately 5.3% over the past few decades (World Bank – average data of gross domestic product (GDP) growth from 1991 to 2020). By increasing women's LFP, the country can move a step closer towards a developed country status. While the government has put in place several training programmes and has provided educational opportunities to improve women's LFP, these efforts seem to have had minimal impact. Thus, in this study, we ask whether socially specific factors such as gender-role attitudes could have contributed to low women's LFP rate in the country.

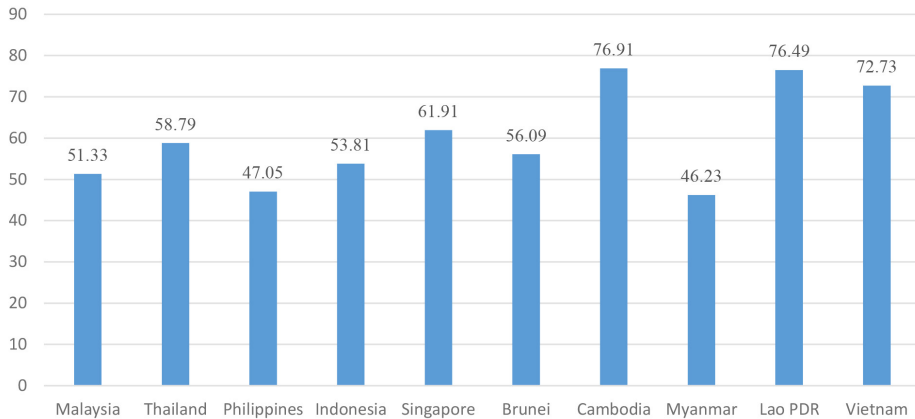


Figure 1: Female ILFP rate (% of female population ages 15+) in 2019.

Source: World Development Indicators (2020)

Very few studies have integrated gender-role attitudes on women's work choices. Attempts have been made to determine whether the individual's attributes play a part but none has investigated how gender norms² affect the decision to participate in the Malaysian labour force. Gender expectations of men's breadwinning role and women's homemaking role prevail in many developing countries (Momsen 2019; Cruz-Alonso et al. 2023; Nor Hafizah and Noraida 2020). These gender-role attitudes could be some of the underlying causes behind the low women's LFP in Malaysia. Also, past studies have mainly focused on panel regression, which contributes minimally to a country's policy implication. Our research tries to fill this gap in the literature by employing much richer individual-level data to examine the links in order to uncover subgroup differences in behaviour or preferences, leading to more targeted and actionable insights for policy-making.

Importance of Women in the Workforce

Societies that do not discriminate against gender tend to experience higher economic growth³ (World Bank 2001). Table 1 summarises the LFP rate in Malaysia. Here, we find that women's LFP has remained relatively low, hovering around 43.09%–51.37% over the past decade. The relative importance of women as an essential pool of resource is undervalued here. Sidelining women in the labour market creates a situation of underutilisation of human resources, which serves to hinder productivity and economic growth. Increasing women's LFP is paramount in meeting Malaysia's economic growth targets.⁴

Furthermore, there is growing evidence that working women have a positive influence on the household as they are empowered to make decisions and contribute towards household income, which in turn accrues benefits for their children. For instance, when the household income doubles, child mortality reduces as mothers take better care of themselves and their children (Bradshaw, Castellino and Diop 2013). In a Harvard study that surveyed 50,000 adults in 24 high-income countries, daughters of working mothers are more likely to be employed in supervisory positions and earn better incomes (McGinn, Castro and Lingo 2015).

Table 1: LFP rate in Malaysia (% of female/male population age 15+ [modeled International Labour Organisation estimate])

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)
2007	43.74	76.84
2008	43.09	76.30
2009	43.66	76.21
2010	43.50	76.15
2011	45.15	76.73
2012	46.53	77.32
2013	49.20	77.61
2014	50.13	77.27
2015	50.47	77.40
2016	50.62	77.17
2017	50.96	77.24
2018	51.37	77.43
2019	51.33	77.41

Source: World Development Indicators (2020)

Policies Implemented to Encourage Women's Labour Force Participation in Malaysia

Several efforts and plans have been implemented to improve women's status through the national five-year development plan and long-term sectoral planning. These efforts started in the 5th Malaysia Plan (1986–1990). By 1989, the National Policy for Women was formulated to ensure equal opportunities in all sectors of development. Its contents were integrated into the 6th Malaysia Plan⁵ (1991–1995) and subsequent policies. A significant amount of money⁶ was also budgeted to

support projects implemented by the Women's Affairs Secretariat (HAWA) and various non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The successive five-year plans were conceived to enhance the position of women in society. Under the 8th Malaysia Plan⁷ (2001–2005), the government funded RM10 million to encourage the development of women entrepreneurs. In the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006–2010), the government started promoting flexible work arrangements. These efforts continued in the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011–2015). Also, the Career Comeback programme⁸ was launched to recruit women on career breaks. In the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016–2020), the government aimed to increase women's LFP rate to 59% by 2020. Notably, these policies were positioned to enhance women's role in economic development through a favourable working environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Currently, there is a consensus in the literature regarding the determinants of women's LFP.⁹ In line with the post-materialist theory, modern societies are experiencing a shift towards more liberal values as a result of economic development (Inglehart 1997). Inglehart proposes a linkage between one's belief system with political and socioeconomic variables. More often than not, cultural norms are revealed through fundamental values. Cultural norms also shape attitudes towards traditional gender-roles (Inglehart and Norris 2003) and explain the persistence of the gender gap (Humlum, Nandrup and Smith 2019). On the one hand, cultural norms could disapprove of work done by women and their contribution to organisational goals (England 2005). On the other hand, cultural norms could alleviate women's status in society.

Economists Akerlof and Kranton (2000) point out that “norms” are the missing factor in the standard economic discourses. Standard microeconomic models view individuals and households as rational beings but fail to include their positioning in society. To illustrate this further, we look at the basic labour supply theory, which is often used to explain women's labour market decisions. The theory predicts that women will choose to work if the market value of time is higher than the opportunity cost of giving up time in the household. As a result, we expect that an increase in the wage increases the probability of women's LFP, while an increase in the cost of child care decreases the likelihood of women's LFP (Connelly 1992).

Gender-Role Attitudes

Women's rights continue to make headlines amongst academic circles and policymakers as the traditional belief concerning the proper roles for men and women in society starts to change. Individual values and societal norms concerning gender roles have been identified as important determinants of women's LFP (Guerrero and Naldini 1996; Pfau-Effinger 2004; Khoudja and Fleischmann 2015; Kanas and Müller 2021).

Much has been revealed about the tension between work and family issues. For instance, the involvement of husband and wife in household chores plays a role here. If a woman is left to balance housework and paid employment outside, they may opt out of the labour force when the opportunity arises. According to Boo (2015),¹⁰ various ethnic groups in Malaysia display different degrees of housework involvement. For example, Malay women tend to hold more traditional gender-role ideology. They believe that children and family should be given priority. Thus, they tend to spend more time doing household chores compared to non-Malays.

On the other hand, Tai and Treas (2013) find that men are open to participating in domestic household tasks amongst Nordic English-speaking countries. Husbands, together with their wives, play active roles as involved parents (Duyvendak and Stavenuiter 2004). Thus, de Laat and Sevilla-Sanz (2011) assert that women are more likely to enter the workforce in countries where men contribute more to household labour. Similarly, in the United States, studies have found that men's proportionate contribution to domestic tasks has risen to about one-third over the years (Hook 2006). The increase is due to men's involvement in childcare responsibilities. Besides, Evertsson (2014) has linked the changing roles of men and women to their beliefs, whereby couples with non-traditional or egalitarian ideology tend to divide household tasks and childcare responsibilities more equally compared to couples who continue to hold on to traditional roles.

Recent studies focus on the link between traditional gender roles and employment decisions, fertility choices and gender pay inequality (Fortin 2015; Brinton and Lee 2016; Fernández and Fogli 2009; Greenhaus, Peng and Allen 2012). These studies mostly conclude that women who believe in traditional gender roles are less likely to participate in the labour force (Wang 2019; Stam, Verbakel and de Graaf 2014; Hakim 2002) or hold a paid job outside the house (Fortin 2005; van der Lippe and van Dijk 2002). Single country studies on Italy (Romano and Bruzzese 2007) and Germany (Lewis, Campbell and Huerta 2008) found traditional gender-role beliefs still prevail even in the face of modernisation. Linking this to types of employment, Ciabattari (2001) states that men whose wives work part-time tend

to have more traditional gender beliefs than men whose wives work full-time. This finding could be explained by the positive association between benevolent sexism and preference for a traditional partner (Thomae and Houston 2016), in which men who have more traditional gender beliefs are more likely to marry women with strong gender attitudes.

Furthermore, in a household, the woman's values (more than those of the men) serve to influence her labour force decisions (Stam, Verbakel and de Graaf 2014). Fernández, Fogli and Olivetti (2004) explore the role of "intergenerational transfer of attitudes" towards gender-roles. Their study found that a woman tends to work if her mother-in-law had worked. This finding may be due to having had a working mother-in-law liberalise their husbands' attitudes towards traditional gender roles.

Personal Attributes

Existing studies note the influence of a combination of personal traits and household characteristics that determine a person's LFP rate. Generally, empirical evidence points to the decisive role of education on women in the labour force (Bratti 2003; Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits 2008; Gasparini and Marchionni 2015; Klasen et al. 2021) as educational expansion gives rise to women's support for gender egalitarianism (Thijs et al. 2019). Education is the primary determinant of the market value of time, while the number of children affects the opportunity cost of time in the household. The market value of time is higher for a highly educated woman since she is given a higher wage. As such, the opportunity cost for her to withdraw from the labour force is also higher in comparison to someone who receives less education. Pena-Boquete (2016) points out that highly educated women prefer to work since the opportunity cost of not working is very high. The level of education represents the expected wage rate when a woman enters the labour force (Dankmeyer 1996). Thus, highly educated women have greater economic incentive to participate in the labour force due to their ability to earn more (England, Garcia-Beaulieu and Ross 2004) and engage in longer hours in the labour force market (Gündüz-Hoşgör and Smits 2008).

In line with the life cycle model, it is possible that women's LFP changes along their life course (closely associated with family events). It is possible that women choose to withdraw from the labour force when they have children and re-enter the labour market later in life as their children grow more independent. Irwan Nadzif and Nor Azaian (2011) divide their sample size by different age categories and find that mothers in their 30s tend to have the most significant work-family conflict. Looking at changes over time, Shank (1988) find an inverted U-shape of women's LFP rate by age. Women's LFP increases at the initial stage and falls when they enter the marrying and child-bearing age.

Another important determinant is the individual's marital status. Amongst white women of working age, Davis (1984) found a higher proportion of employment of unmarried women (single, widowed and divorced) compared with married women. Cherlin (2004) finds that the fall in married women's LFP may be caused by greater commitment to the family. Married women also tend to retire earlier than divorced or widowed women (Warner and Hofmeister 2006), mainly due to joint retirement preferences or family care demands (Szinovacz, DeViney and Davey 2001). A higher level of household wealth may also facilitate exiting the labour force earlier than the actual retirement age (Willson 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Our discussion in the preceding section showed the importance of including gender-role attitudes in the study of women's LFP in Malaysia. While personal attributes play a significant role in determining one's LFP, there is evidence that holding traditional gender roles may be a hindrance to achieving gender equality. In social sciences, many constructs of interest are often not directly observable. The empirical study acknowledges this limitation and addresses the absence of data by relying on proxies and using data from established secondary sources.

The study utilises three waves of data from the World Values Survey (WVS) dataset.¹¹ Data for Wave 5 (1,201 respondents) was collected in the year 2006, data for Wave 6 (1,300 respondents) was collected in 2011, while data for Wave 7 (1,313 respondents) was collected in 2018. Table 2 displays the distribution of the total respondents by gender. However, given the nature of the study, only a total of 1,890 female respondents have been included in the study. Table 3 shows the total numbers and percentages of races for respondents. From the three waves, the largest female respondents are *bumiputera*, followed by Chinese and Indian.

Table 2: The total respondents by gender

Wave	Number of observations, n (%)		Total
	Male	Female	
5	599 (49.9)	602 (50.1)	1,201
6	668 (51.4)	632 (48.6)	1,300
7	657 (50.0)	656 (50.0)	1,313

Source: World Values Survey (2020)

Table 3: Female respondents by race

Wave	Number of observations, n (%)			Total
	<i>Bumiputera</i>	Chinese	Indian	
5	388 (64.45)	163 (27.08)	51 (8.47)	602
6	425 (67.25)	159 (25.16)	48 (7.59)	632
7	459 (70.29)	152 (23.28)	42 (6.43)	653

Source: World Values Survey (2020)

Table 4 shows respondents' ratings four questions (statements) from the WVS (waves 5, 6 and 7) to capture the respondents' gender role attitudes. Table 4 indicates that approximately 56% of the respondents perceived the woman as homemaker, measured in agreement with the statement, "Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay". About 58% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "men make better political leaders than women", reflecting less egalitarian gender-role values. When asked, "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women", as many as 82% of women either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, and this depicts perceptions of the man as the main breadwinner and gender role expectations placed on women (Azmat, Guell and Manning 2006). However, only 33% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl". The preliminary descriptive analyses seem to confirm the prevalent belief of gender-role attitudes among Malaysian women.

We turn now to racial differences with respect to gender role attitudes, as shown in Table 5. The three waves of surveys indicated that, out of 1,271 *bumiputera* respondents to the statement "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay", more than half (57.36%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. A similar pattern was revealed for Chinese (51.37%) and Indian (54.68%) respondents. When asked, "on the whole, do men make better political leaders than women?", 62.27% of the *bumiputera* respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. However, slightly fewer than half of the Chinese (48.42%) and Indian (49.65%) respondents strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, indicating slightly less egalitarian gender role values among Chinese and Indian than *bumiputera* respondents. In terms of the question, "a university education is more important for a boy than for a girl", more than 50% of the respondents from all races: *bumiputera* (65.41%), Chinese (72.30%) and Indian (65.96%), either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. About 65% of the *bumiputera* respondents opted for strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women", while the percentage was slightly lower for Chinese and Indian respondents, 53.23% and 59.54%, respectively.

Table 4: Response to gender role attitudes questions (by total respondents)

Questions in WVS	1	2	3	4	Total respondents
Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.	319 (16.9%)	732 (38.8%)	695 (36.9%)	140 (7.4%)	1,886
On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.	306 (16.2%)	786 (41.6%)	636 (33.7%)	161 (8.5%)	1,889
A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.	177 (9.4%)	442 (23.4%)	908 (48.1%)	362 (19.1%)	1,889
When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.	595 (45.8%)	465 (35.8%)	139 (10.7%)	99 (7.6%)	1,298

Source: WVS waves 5, 6 and 7

Notes: 1 = strongly agreed, 2 = agreed, 3 = disagreed and 4 = strongly disagreed. In wave 7, the question, “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women” added one option “neither agree nor disagree”; about 592 respondents opted for this option. Recorded to Likert scales from 1–4 only.

We employ a logistic regression model to examine a set of attitudinal and personal attribute factors that influenced the dichotomous option of the female LFP decision. Since our dependent variable is dichotomous, it may not be appropriate to adopt the ordinary least squares model, as it might violate the constant error variance assumption and yield an inefficient estimator. As such, the binary logistic regression model is more suitable (Woo and Teng 2019; Gujarati 2003).

Personal attributes and gender role attitudes have important influence on Malaysian women’s LFP decisions. We employed four questions from WVS that asked respondents about their gender role values to determine whether they hold on to traditional gender role values or egalitarian values. The four-item measure uses a four-point response scale which ranges from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree. The respondents chose the number that best described their relative positions. The questions were selected based on the literature on gender role attitudes.

Table 5: Response to gender-role attitudes questions (by ethnicity)

Races	Questions from WVS	1	2	3	4	Total
<i>Bumiputera</i>	Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.	221 (17.39%)	508 (39.97%)	466 (36.66%)	76 (5.98%)	1,271
	On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.	227 (17.85%)	565 (44.42%)	399 (31.37%)	81 (6.37%)	1,272
	A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.	131 (10.30%)	309 (24.29%)	609 (47.88%)	223 (17.53%)	1,272
	When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.	434 (37.41%)	317 (27.33%)	352 (30.34%)	57 (4.91%)	1,160
Chinese	Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.	74 (15.64%)	169 (35.73%)	177 (37.42%)	53 (11.21%)	473
	On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.	62 (13.11%)	167 (35.31%)	184 (38.90%)	60 (12.68%)	473
	A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.	34 (7.19%)	97 (20.51%)	229 (48.41%)	113 (23.89%)	473
	When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.	115 (26.50%)	116 (26.73%)	170 (39.17%)	33 (7.60%)	434
Indian	Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.	24 (17.27%)	52 (37.41%)	52 (37.41%)	11 (7.91%)	139
	On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do.	17 (12.06%)	53 (37.59%)	52 (36.88%)	19 (13.48%)	141
	A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl.	12 (8.51%)	36 (25.53%)	67 (47.52%)	26 (18.44%)	141
	When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.	46 (35.11%)	32 (24.43%)	43 (32.82%)	10 (7.63%)	131

Source: WVS waves 5, 6 and 7

Notes: 1 = strongly agreed, 2 = agreed, 3 = disagreed and 4 = strongly disagreed. In wave 7, the question, “when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”, added one option, “neither agree nor disagree;” about 592 respondents opted for this option. Recorded to Likert scales from 1–4 only.

First, we used the agreement with the statement, “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay”, to reflect the traditional gender division of labour. The agreement with the WVS statement that “a university education is more important for a boy than a girl” was used to denote social and cultural norms that may not be in favour of girls and women in higher education. Traditional gender role attitudes are also reflected in the following WVS statement: “when jobs

are scarce, men should have more right to a job than female”. Finally, we asked whether “on the whole, men make better political leaders than female do”. Initial correlation analysis revealed that the chosen variables are not highly correlated with the other variables.

The individual’s personal attributes, such as age, marital status, educational attainment (1 = low, 2 = middle, 3 = high), and year of the survey, are entered as control variables. Marital status (1 = married, living together as married, and cohabit and 0 = single, separated, widowed, or divorced). Unmarried women (single, separated, or divorced) tend to engage in a full-time job as they have to work to support themselves (Oppenheimer 1997). We expect to find that educational attainment is positively correlated with women’s LFP. Age and age squared were also included in our study to look at whether age matters in their LFP decision.

Since Malaysia is a multiracial country, we are also interested in whether LFP patterns differ by ethnic groups, by creating dichotomous variables for *bumiputera* (which includes the Malay and indigenous populations), Chinese and Indian.

Since we are interested in determining the factors that may determine an individual’s employment status (whether to work or not to work), we chose the WVS question, which asks respondents about their employment status. The exact wording was as follows: “are you employed now or not? If yes, how many hours a week? If more than one job: only for the main job”. We recorded the data in a binary variable. This question is appropriate given that our study is interested in investigating the determinants of low women’s LFP rate in Malaysia.

Our research question is, therefore, “what are the potential determinants of women’s LFP rate in Malaysia?” Based on the preliminary descriptive analysis, we suspect that traditional gender role perceptions tend to govern how men and women behave in society and that stereotypical gender roles might adversely impact women’s LFP. As such, we aim to test the following model.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Employment} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Education} + \beta_2 \text{ Age} + \beta_3 \text{ number of children} + \beta_4 \\ & \text{marital status} + \beta_5 \text{ ethnicity} + \beta_6 \text{ gender} - \text{role attitudes} + \\ & u_i \end{aligned} \quad (\text{Eq.1})$$

where, employment is = 1 if the person is currently employed, otherwise = 0.

DISCUSSION

Our objective is to investigate how various factors affect women's employment decisions. Logit regression was adopted to simultaneously assess the effect of personal attributes and gender role attitudes on the likelihood of women's employment decisions. Table 6 indicates the estimated coefficients, standard errors, odds ratio and marginal effects of the model discussed earlier in the research methodology section. The specified models were statistically significant, as evidenced by the likelihood ratio test at a 1% significance level. As such, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) that all coefficients are zero. The result of the model is outlined in Table 6.¹²

Table 6: Effect of independent variables on choice of LFP: summary statistics of the logit basic model

Dependent variable: Women's employment status (1 = working, 0 = not working)					
	Coeff.	Std. errors	Odds ratio exp	p-value	Marginal effect
Personal attributes					
Education: Primary	-0.438**	0.0996	0.645	0.005	-0.081
Education: Secondary	0.071	0.1236	1.074	0.563	0.042
Age	0.341***	0.0407	1.406	0.000	0.071
Age squared	-0.004***	0.0004	0.996	0.000	-0.001
Marital status: Married	-0.510***	0.1009	0.601	0.002	-0.106
Marital status: Divorced, widowed, cohabitation	-0.600**	0.1561	0.549	0.035	-0.118
Ethnicity: Chinese	0.238*	0.1594	1.269	0.058	0.049
Ethnicity: Indian	0.151	0.2272	1.163	0.441	0.022
Number of children	-0.153***	0.0315	0.858	0.000	-0.032
Gender-role attitudes					
Being a housewife is fulfilling (housewife)	-0.369***	0.0720	0.691	0.000	-0.041
Men are better at politics (men politics)	-0.154	0.0961	0.857	0.169	-0.074
Universities are for boys (uni for boys)	0.075	0.1257	1.078	0.522	0.063
Jobs are scarce men more deserving (jobs for men)	-0.053	0.0452	0.949	0.268	-0.001
Constant	-5.000***	0.0033	0.007	0.000	—

Note: Model Chi-square = 236.52 (significant at 0.000 level); likelihood ratio statistics = -1,146.843, no. of observation = 1,888

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$

Throughout the life cycle, women's labour force behaviour is mainly determined by personal attributes such as education, age, marital status, ethnicity and number of children as follows:

Education

The omitted category against which these dummy variables are contrasted is tertiary-level education. Respondents with primary educational attainment were 0.645 times less likely to participate in the labour force compared to those with tertiary education attainment. The marginal effects indicated that respondents with primary education level have an 8.1% lower probability of being involved in the labour force than those with a tertiary educational level. However, there is no statistically significant difference between secondary and tertiary education attainment respondents. The results were in line with Pena-Boquete (2016), where the market value of time is higher for a highly educated woman, and the opportunity costs of withdrawal from the labour force are much higher compared to those lower educated individuals. Elias (2015) found that the manufacturing and agricultural sectors have drawn greater participation by women in Malaysia. Furthermore, nearly half of the Malaysian labour force has secondary-level education.¹³

Age

The statistically significant coefficients of age and age squared variables confirm an inverted U-shaped pattern of women's LFP. The odds of choosing paid work increased by 1.406 times for older respondents relative to their younger counterparts. The probability of older respondents being involved in the workforce is 7.1% higher compared to the younger ones. The negative and significant age squared suggested an inverted U-shape that indicated that women's involvement in the labour force increases with age but, at some point, a woman has to choose between paid work and family. Some may exit the paid labour force to care for their young children and family.

Marital Status

Respondents who are married were 0.601 times less likely to work compared to those who are single, while the odds of choosing to work decreased by 0.549 times for respondents that are divorced, widowed, or cohabiting compared to single counterparts. The marginal effects showed that respondents who are married (10.6%) and who are divorced, widowed, or cohabiting (11.8%) have a lower probability of working compared to those who are single.

Ethnicity

Our results also show that women's LFP patterns differ by ethnic group. Chinese women were 1.269 times more likely to participate in the labour force compared to *bumiputera* women. The probability of Chinese women participating in the workforce was 4.9% higher than that of the *bumiputera* women. However, we found insignificant differences between Indian and *bumiputera* women.

Number of Children

Women with children were 0.858 times less likely to work compared to their counterparts. In addition, the marginal effects revealed that respondents with children have 3.2% lower probability of working than those without children. The statistically significant inverse relationship between the number of children in the household and women's LFP decisions indicates role conflict as they face challenges of balancing work and parenting duties (Narayan and Smyth 2006).

Next, we direct our attention to the variables used to measure gender-role attitudes and the findings are as follows:

Gender Role Attitudes

Only one out of four measurements of gender role variables are negative and statistically significantly affect women's employment decisions. Our empirical findings indicate that gender role attitudes matter in preventing women from taking up paid work. Women who conform to traditional gender roles and agreed (or strongly agreed) that "being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay" are 0.691 times less likely to work. The probability of those holding traditional gender separation roles choosing to work decreased by 4.1% relative to those who disagreed with the statement. Existing gender-based theories retain the view that women who support gender separation roles, with males as the breadwinner for the family and women as homemakers, are less likely to participate in the labour force. Furthermore, they believe that the position of a woman is "in the kitchen" and family caregiving is the sole responsibility of a woman. Such values discourage a woman from participating in the workforce.

The other three proxies used to measure gender role attitudes such as "men are better at politics", "university is more important for men than for female" and "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than female" are insignificant in our model. This insignificant finding may be due to the Malaysian government's policies to reduce gender bias in education.¹⁴ Furthermore, the enrolment rates of

girls in school in Malaysia are higher than or at least equivalent to those of boys at all levels of schooling (Rowley and Yukongdi 2008). The various national policies on women have also offered women an equal opportunity to participate in the labour force. These policies could have reduced the perception that men have more right to a job than women in the Malaysian context.

However, it was quite surprising to find the insignificant impact of “men are better at politics” on women LFP in view of the current overwhelming majority of male incumbents in the Malaysian political culture. The insignificance perhaps could be explained by the increasing positive trend in the fielding of women candidates. The percentage of women candidates elected in the 2013 General Election was 10.7% and rose to 14.4% in the 2018 general election (Sukhani 2020). The chi-square goodness of the fit test of the three models suggests a good fit of the model.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate that Malaysian women’s LFP decisions are closely associated with family events. Married women are less likely to work compared to those who are single, and the number of children in the household tends to discourage women in the workforce due to high childcare costs. The significance of age and age-squared variables supports the inverted U-shape argument that women’s involvement in the workforce increases with age, but beyond a threshold point they may face work-family conflict, and some even choose to leave the workforce to care for the children. Furthermore, women’s LFP patterns differ by ethnic groups. We found that gender role attitudes that are significantly associated with women’s LFP are measured by agreements with the statements: “being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay”. In other words, women who hold traditional gender roles views are less likely to participate in the labour force. Our findings render support to the labour supply theory argument. However, due to data limitations, our study did not allow for industry-specific analysis.

Based on our results, we suggest several policies to improve women’s LFP in Malaysia. The Malaysian government’s plans to promote gender equality in the country are lauded even though women’s LFP remain low. To partially resolve the burden of childcare or household chores, provision of resources for dependent care such as on-site child care and elder care assistance will indeed help (Lu et al. 2009; Siu and Philips 2007). Very often, women’s LFP decisions depend on the availability and affordability of childcare facilities. Policies tailored at lowering child-rearing costs, for instance, personal tax exemption for children, childcare subsidies, and the child tax credit will help lighten the burden of working mothers.

The current RM1,000 tax relief based on an average of the 21% tax bracket only gives rise to RM210¹⁵ tax saving per annum on average for every child in a family, which could be inadequate to encourage greater women's LFP concerning the high childcare cost (Siah and Lee 2015). The government could also boost the employers' support of flexible work arrangements or to take on family-friendly policies by offering tax breaks and subsidies.

It is also essential for the government to review the paid paternity leave scheme to increase women's employment. The current entitlement of two days of paternity leave (up to five surviving children) is among the lowest compared to other countries in the region.¹⁶ More extended paternity leave would be a compelling incentive to encourage fathers to share childcare tasks. We believe that the economic efficiency of having more women in the workforce to meet the production and consumption of a growing economy will eventually moderate the influence of traditional gender-role attitudes.

NOTES

1. The 11th and 12th Malaysia Plans focus on the information and communication technology (ICT) industry and is critical in lessening the socioeconomic gap in the country.
2. Gender norms define how societies perceive men's and women's behaviours. These norms, in turn, lead to the formation of gender roles that men and women are expected to follow in these societies.
3. Projections based on the current growth indicate that Malaysia's GDP will grow by 2.9% if the present women's LFP rate increases by 1.5 times (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2014). Based on the latest GDP (constant) values, this translates to a staggering RM13.8 billion (World Development Indicator 2020).
4. As outlined in the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011–2015) which is aimed at developing and retaining talent in the workforce.
5. Policies are in place to ensure gender equality in terms of resource allocation, information dissimulation, work and educational opportunities.
6. A budget of RM20 million was allocated during the 6th Malaysia Plan and this amount was increased to RM50 million in the 7th Malaysia Plan.
7. Furthermore, numerous schemes were encouraged under the Small and Medium Industries Development Corporation. A landmark development was observed in 2001, when the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development was formed to undertake all matters concerning women and increase women's stature in the society.

8. The Resourcing Grant provides co-funding of 75% of the cost incurred by employers to run the programme up to a maximum of RM100,000, while the retention grant is equivalent to returnees' one month's salary (up to a maximum of RM100,000 per employer) to encourage employers to recruit women on career breaks.
9. Klasen and Pieters (2012) posit that education, household income, socioeconomic status and culture jointly determine women's LFP. In many cases, women's LFP is driven by the need to survive rather than economic opportunities.
10. Other studies, such as Irwan Nadzif and Nor Azaian (2011), argue that ethnicity plays a crucial role in managing the individuals' demands between work and family roles, which makes involvement in both roles challenging. This work-family conflict is more prevalent amongst Chinese and Indian women compared to the Malays. Kane (2000) finds that gender role attitudes vary across racial or ethnic groups. For instance, white married females are less likely to work compared to African American females. The reason is that they are more concerned that paid employment may create conflict with their role as a wife or mother (Blee and Tickamyer 1995; Rice and Coates 1995). African American females are also less traditional compared to white American females (Harris and Firestone 1998).
11. The WVS is a multi-country survey of individuals sponsored by the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, based at the University of Michigan. The survey enables a cross-national comparison of values and norms on various topics. Several recent studies have utilised the WVS dataset to better understand Asian values (Horak and Klein 2016; Koh, Lee and Bomhoff 2016; Welzel and Dalton 2016).
12. The analysis was also conducted separately for waves 5–7. The results did not differ much.
13. According to World Development Indicator's database, 43.2% of women labour force participation in Malaysia had completed secondary-level education in the year 2014.
14. These policies began with the 2nd Malaysia Plan which provides equal access to educational opportunities for both men and women.
15. According to the report of Household Income and Basic Amenities Survey (2014), the average monthly income of Malaysian households is approximately RM6,000 which puts an average household in the estimated 21% tax bracket.
16. Singaporean men are entitled to one week of paid paternity leave funded by the Government. They may also apply for one additional week of paternity leave at the employers' discretion (funded by the Government). Men in Japan are entitled to apply for 52 weeks of leave (while drawing 60% of their regular earnings). Men in Thailand are entitled to 15 days of paternity leave and it is 7 days of paternity leave for the Filipinos.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia [grant number FRGS/2/2013/SS07/MUSM/03/1].

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