

**Malaysian Female Graduates:
Marriage, Motherhood and Labour Force Participation**

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Abstract: Although the female labour force participation rate is generally increasing in Malaysia for the past 30 years, the percentage of women with tertiary education participating in the labour force is lower as compared to their male counterparts. The scenario is perturbing especially when the women participation is highly anticipated in order to help Malaysia achieving a high income economy. This paper therefore aims to identify and give better insights on the factors that withdraw married female graduates from participating in the labour market. Being qualitative in nature, this study involved interviewing 19 Malaysian married female graduates that withdraw from the workforce, either not entering the market at all or exiting the market at certain lifestage. Four main factors were identified influencing the withdrawal of the tertiary-educated women from the labour market. The factors were categorized as family and children factor, spouse factor, job related factor and child care arrangement factor. The findings are hoped to be benefited for the authorities and organizations in making policies that are able to attract more female graduates to participate in the labour force or to retain female labour from exiting the workforce.

Key Words: female graduates, marriage, motherhood, labour force participation, withdrawal, exit

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1. Introduction

The role of women in Malaysian economic development is never undermined. It is in fact being acknowledged by the society as well as by the government. Even though the labour market is long dominated by male, Malaysia generally witnessed an increasing rate in the female labour force participation ^[1], from 44.5% in 1982 to 49.5% in 2012 ^[2]. However, the percentage is still below the targeted figure. According to Annette Dixon, the World Bank Country Director for Malaysia in 2012, “*Malaysia has the opportunity to accelerate its transformation into a high income economy if more women were in the labour force*”. Therefore, the increasing role and participation of women in this country is highly anticipated.

By looking at the tertiary level enrolment, female students generally outnumbered the male students in most universities in Malaysia. In year 2011, the ratio of female to male university graduates is at 60:40 ^[3]. The data from the Statistical Department of Malaysia also showed that there were 650,546 female population in Malaysia having tertiary education in year 2000. Nevertheless, the percentage of female with tertiary education participating in the labour force is less than their male counterparts. There were only 59.5% female graduates participated in the labour force in 2012, while the male graduates’ participation rate was higher at 71.1% ^[4].

The scenario of female graduates choosing to stay at home after getting married or having children also deteriorate the labour force participation. In year 2000, there were 49,611 or 7% of female population in the age category of labour force, and having tertiary education chose to stay at home to be full time housewives ^[4]. Although there were only 7% of them, if all 49,611 women are working, they will much or less makes a meaningful contribution to the country’s economic growth.

As such, the objective of this paper is to identify and give better insights on the factors that withdraw married female graduates from participating in the labour market; either not entering the market at all or exiting the market at certain ¹lifestage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Employment, Maternity and Child Care Conflicts

One of the important barriers for women to remain in the labour market is childbearing. Studies showed that childbearing has a negative effect to female workers ^[5] while a decrease in fertility rate increases female labour force participation ^[6]. To become a mother is an important lifestage in women life cycle where several significant personal, social and biological changes coincide ^[7]. The conflicts of having to take care of children and to fulfil job requirements often leads to the withdrawal of women from employment.

A well-known economist, Prof. Dr. Barjoyai Bardai, stated that out of 70% female students who successfully further their studies at university, only 30% of them chose to work, while the rest chose to become full-time housewives ^[8]. The study gives the impression that education costs invested did not give a good return or contribution to the country. ^[9] also stated that many professional women who are talented and well-educated chose to stop working in order to stay at home and take care of their families. Decisions to quit from a good position to manage the household and take care of the

¹ Lifestage is a stage or phase in human life where individuals matures or make transitions from being single, independent and working, to getting married, being a parent of young children to being an 'empty nester' when children has all grown up and left home (<http://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/lifestage>).

children may be a good possible solution for them to escape from the home role problems, but at the same time it is a big loss to the country as these talented and well-educated women are not productively contributing to the country's economic growth.

However, the negative effect of childbearing to women's employment will also depend on several factors such as types of job ^[5] and organization supports ^[10,11]. Women who work in informal sector is found to be more affected after having children ^[5]. Jobs that have rigid working hours, unclear schedule, or having to be outstation often also affect women with young children. These are the types of job that make taking care of children becomes difficult. Whereas organizational support (such as the willingness of the organization to give flexible working hours, childcare facilities or job sharing) was able to reduce work to family conflicts among employed mothers ^[10, 11]. Such supports helped to encourage employed mothers with young children to remain in the work force and contributing to the economy.

3. Research Methodology

This study aims to give better insights on the factors that withdraw married female graduates from labour force participation. Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen due to its nature and capability to give better explanation and justifications. Using purposive and snow-ball sampling, the selection of sample was done through specific criteria and characteristics that have been set by the researchers. The samples must fulfil four main criteria that include well-educated women holding at least a diploma certificate, they are in good health which makes them capable to work, the women is married and one that never enter work market or exiting work force at certain life stage. Out of 22 samples contacted, the researchers managed to get responds from 19 of them (all are Malays); which makes the 86.4% response rate. A summary of the respondents' profiles can be referred in Table 1.

Personal interviews were conducted by researchers to collect important data and information. Due to distance and financial constraints, the two-way communication was conducted through 'WhatsApp' application. Benefiting the technology, the 'WhatsApp' application which was based on online text messaging also preferred by the respondents as they feel more comfortable and relax in answering the questions. Applying a semi-structured interview, 16 open-ended questions were prepared in advance by the researchers. Further enquiry and discussion were held whenever there were vague and unclear answers. The data and information were then analysed using interview coding and themes. In order to protect confidentiality of the respondents, their real names are concealed and were re-coded as Respondent 1 to Respondent 19.

4. Findings and Discussions

Demographic profile of the nineteen respondents that have been interviewed in this study is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Respondents	Age	No. of children (age)	Education	Last employment	Leave employment for (years)	Spouse occupation
1	26	1 (11 mth)	Diploma in Nursing	Nurse	2 years	Army
2	35	2 (8 yo, 3 yo)	Bachelor degree in Marketing	Teacher	3 years	Army
3	33	4 (6 yo, 5 yo, 3 yo, 4 mth)	Bachelor degree in Finance	Administration staff	5 months	Restaurant operator
4	29	2 (4 yo, 3 yo)	Diploma in Computer Science	Administration assistant	1 year	Bank officer
5	25	1 (13 mth)	Diploma in Nursing	Never enter workforce	3 years	Self-employed
6	29	2 (4 yo, 5 mth)	Bachelor degree in Accountancy	Banker – Accountant assistant	1 year	Army
7	36	3 (9 yo, 6 yo, 2 mth)	Bachelor degree in Finance	Operations analyst	9 years	Pilot
8	36	2 (8 yo, 6 yo)	Bachelor degree in Economics	Store manager	4 years	Technician
9	36	3 (11 yo, 9 yo, 5 yo)	Bachelor degree in Accountancy	Banker – Head of loan administration unit	Just left (11 days)	Engineer
10	36	4 (13 yo, 11 yo, 10 yo, 3 yo)	Bachelor degree in Economics	Never enter workforce	15 years	Engineer
11	36	3 (12 yo, 8 yo, 6 yo)	Bachelor degree in Economics	Banker – Senior credit officer	5 years	Project manager
12	36	2 (7 yo, 5 yo)	Bachelor degree in Accountancy	Banker – Branch manager	5 years	Tooling technician
13	34	1 (12 yo)	Bachelor degree in Civil Engineering	Engineer	5 years	Multilevel marketing businessman
14	36	3 (11 yo, 7 yo)	Bachelor degree in Economics	Finance and administrative executive	3 months	Businessman
15	34	3 (9 yo, 6 yo, 3 yo)	Bachelor degree in Science (Biology)	Application specialist	4 years	Engineer
16	29	1 (2 yo)	Bachelor degree in Civil Engineering	Research assistant	2 years	Lecturer
17	36	1 (3 yo)	Bachelor degree in Economics	Finance director	3 years	Self-employed (businessman)
18	33	3 (6 yo, 4 yo, 3 yo)	Bachelor degree in Islamic Studies	Islamic religious officer	7 months	Self-employed (businessman)
19	33	2 (5 yo, 2 yo)	Bachelor degree in Human Resource Economics	Training executive	3 years	Assistant director of a company

* yo = “years old”, mth = month

4.1 Factors and Motivations of Female Labour to Withdraw from Labour Force

Female labour force participation has always been one of the important areas in the studies of labour economics. Many researchers ^[5,6] seek to explain trends in labour force participation and motivations of female labour to withdraw from the labour force.

This study found four main factors that influence female labour to exit from labour force or to not entering the labour market from the beginning. The factors were categorised as family and children factor, spouse factor, job related factors and child care arrangement factor.

4.1.1 Family and Children Factor

Children especially the young ones always need intensive care, and not part-time care. This principle held by many couples in which they believe that the care of children in day care centers is not able to match the care of a mother. In fact in Mediterranean countries while they have advanced in the incorporation of women into the labour market, most of them still assuming total responsibility for housework and the care of the children ^[12]. The results of our interviews with the respondents also become evident that this principle affects married female graduates’ labour force participation decision. Majority of them admitted that the main reason they stop working is because of their children. Some respondents admitted that they voluntarily stopped working, even though they are already at a high rank position, merely to take care and raise their children themselves.

Respondent 1 (26 years old) who holds a diploma in nursing voluntarily stop working after marriage because she wants to concentrate on her family and take care of her little children (11 months old son). Respondent 12 (36 years old) also shared the same reason and express her guilt when sending her children to a day care center:

“I resigned voluntarily to give full attention to my family. I do not want the children to be raised by a baby sitter. I want my children to grow in front of my own eyes. I did send my eldest to the baby sitter before, but every time I will feel sad and guilty leaving my child at the nursery.”

The uneasy feeling of sending children to a day care center also shared by Respondent 16 (29 years old) who has a bachelor degree in engineering:

“I want to take care of my little daughter. It feels not right to send her to the nursery. I did try, but when she often gets sick, fever, allergies I did not enjoy working anymore. So I voluntarily quit my job and become fulltime housewife.”

Respondent 18 (33 years old), an Islamic religious officer who just resigned from her work 7 months ago (during the research was conducted), felt very happy and grateful to finally able to raise her three children on her own:

“I am very grateful and happy that I can look after my children on my own now. I want my children to eat the food that I cook. I do not want them to grow eating food cooked by other people, baby sitters or a housemaid. I used to hire a maid before because my job requires me to be outstation regularly. I had no time to be with my children. The time is not flexible and I’m not happy that my children were raised by a maid”.

Respondent 9 (36 years old) who has been working for more than 10 years at a local bank and already held a position as head of loan administration unit also finally leave work (just resigned for 11 days) for family and children:

“I leave work voluntarily. My family and my children are my priority. The intention to resign has actually long overdue. I wanted to resign earlier but we are not ready financially. Now that my husband has a better job offer, I am very happy to resign and concentrate on taking care of my family.”

Nevertheless, there are some mothers who are very fussy about child care. For instance, Respondent 17 (36 years old), stop working because she does not believe that a stranger can take a good care of her children:

“I want to take care on my own. I do not trust other people to look after my son. It may be because I conceived this child only after 8 years of marriage. So it is difficult for me to leave my child under baby sitter’s care. My family likewise raise their children themselves...because we are fussy. I also prefer to work from home so that I don’t have to leave my 3 year-old son”.

Some respondents chose to stop working for a better time management for the family. Respondent 14 (36 years old) agreed that:

“...Sending and fetching children to school are safer as I don’t have to depend on school bus. I send and fetch them myself. My children and husband’s meal (breakfast, lunch and dinner) are more manageable and well prepared. It is also easier for me to accompany

husband whenever he plan for a vacation (my husband always take a leave any time he likes) or when he has to go on a trip for business deals.”

In fact, one of the respondents admitted that although she has a maid but she remain comfortable being a full-time housewife and not a career woman due to time management problem. Respondent 7 (36 years old) said:

“... Currently, I have a maid. Sometime, I leave my younger children at home with her if I have things to settle outside...but I still feel more comfortable not working because I prefer sending and picking up my other children from school myself. If I work it would be difficult for me to manage the time.”

Respondent 7 who formerly worked as an operations analyst in an express delivery company, describing her feelings of being a housewife as:

“... relax, happy, sometimes tired and restless but at the end of the day, satisfying”.

Other respondents also stressed that they were proud to be housewives, and feel good to see the children grow up in front of the eyes.

Married women find household production as an important and efficient way to obtain consumption goods to produce what has been termed "household commodities" ^[13], such as raising children. In the studies of human behavior economics it is assumed that individuals invest rationally, and may invest either in labour market capital or household capital, depending on where their talents will bring the highest return ^[14]. Thus the decision of respondents to stop working, exiting labour force to take care and raising children is a rational investment for them that they believe will give them the highest return and satisfaction. And in line with ^[5] the finding supports the negative effect of a childrearing to female employment, where having children and being a mother pulls away female labour from the work market.

4.1.2 Spouse Factor

The husband affects a woman's fertility and labour force participation decisions in several ways ^[14]. Interviews with respondents revealed that the withdrawal of married female graduates from labour force was influenced by either the nature of the husband's career or because to fulfil the spouse's request.

Respondent 7 (36 years old) whose husband served as a pilot for MAS Airline explained:

“My husband is rarely at home. His work requires him to travel a lot. So we decide that it's important for one of us to stay at home for the children.”

Husband of Respondent 10 (36 years old) also often been sent outstation (both in home and foreign countries) to fulfil work requirements:

“The outstation duration sometimes took from 3 to 6 months. Normally I will accompany him. So it's difficult for me to commit to any job permanently. After having children I concentrate to look after the children.”

Nevertheless, Respondent 5 (25 years old), Respondent 6 (29 years old) and Respondent 11 (36 years old) had to leave jobs in order to fulfil their husbands' request. Respondent 6 who was once an accountant assistant at one of a local bank said:

"My husband asked me to quit because I had too frequent outstation duties (meeting) and coming home late from work. I just obey to my husband's request."

Respondent 11 resigned from her position as a senior credit officer 5 years ago to have a better quality time with the children in order to balance out their long distance family:

"My husband is working oversea. When my children start schooling, it was quite difficult to handle everything by myself and i was also having lack of time to monitor my children's studies. After having discussion with my husband, he requested me to resign."

As many families in Southern European countries highly valued the traditional role of mothers in childcare activities ^[12], the same thing was valued by most families in Malaysia. And in many cases as shown above, the husbands tend to win over wives in terms of employment when it comes to child care conflict and decision making. The wives' employment is very much likely affected by the husbands' decision especially when the husband has a good employment status and earnings ^[15].

4.1.3 Job Related Factor

The job of caring for children especially the young ones is very challenging for employed mothers. The challenge would be greater when the workplace is lacking family-friendly facilities and flexible work policies. This could encourage the withdrawal of female workers from the labour market ^[5].

Our respondents (Respondent 6, 8, 9, 11, 15, and 18) who had to deal with either long working hours, working over the weekends, frequent outstation or inflexible work policies admitted the difficulty to juggle between job requirements and to take care the children influences their decision to quit working.

Frustration and dissatisfaction towards jobs as well as the unsolved conflicts at work were also found to encourage work disengagement. Even though the factor is not as outstanding as compared to other factors in this study, it is somehow contribute to the female graduates labour force withdrawal.

Respondent 4 (29 years old) highlights her reason to stop working as:

"I was not happy at workplace because of the problems I had with my superior. The inflexible working hours made me more determine to quit."

Respondent 14 (36 years old) holding a degree in Economics explains why she quit the post as finance and administration executive and shares the frustrations of the job:

"Bored...it's the same task every day...no challenge. Previously I worked in Penang, there were many workers.....we compete with each other to get promoted. The job was challenging even though the pressure was high. But here the work load is fewer...it's like doing the clerical works. I am also disappointed with employer's attitude...stingy...small bonus...sometimes none at all...the company's revenue goes to his own pocket. I manage the company's account so I know. When company declares loss, staffs get nothing".

Respondent 13 (34 years old) who was once an engineer at oil and gas company in Malaysia shares her experience:

"At first, I'm very happy working at this company because of high salary. But then I've been transferred to KL branch. I started to feel bored because I had to go home late and

had to face the traffic congestion everyday. I decided to quit even though my husband and family didn't approve."

4.1.4 Child Care Arrangement Factor

Working mother is defined as a woman that are able to combine a career with the responsibility of raising children ^[16]. Therefore in order for women to enter and remain in employment, child care arrangement become an important instrument ^[12]. The availability of child care could reduce issues of child-rearing faced by working mothers. ^[17] highlighted that it is important for employers to address issues regarding child care (especially in terms of quality, reliability and also affordability) in order to retain employees who are also mothers. ^[18] also supported the literature when he found an adequate child care provision, particularly for children under age 3, would increase active female participation in the labour market.

From the interviews, the lack of child care facilities and disappointment with the quality of care become apparent to influence the withdrawal of the married female graduates from the labour force. Respondent 3 (33 years old), 9 (36 years old), 11 (36 years old) and 15 (34 years old) admitted the problem they are having with child care arrangement contributed to their withdrawal decision. The lack of a reliable day care facility that suits Respondent 3's requirements left her with no option rather than to be a fulltime housewife:

"I actually resigned when I was about to due delivering my forth baby. At that time my husband was called to come back to his hometown by my father in law which was not in a very good health condition to take over his restaurant business. Here, I cannot find a suitable nursery for my baby, and there is no one can be trusted to take care of my four children. Thus I decided to stop working for good."

Likewise, Respondent 9 shares her difficulty to find a good house maid to take care of her children:

"I changed maid 4 to 5 times. After my last maid left us I had to depend on my mother to look after my children while I'm working. And it didn't quite solve the problem...I pitied my mother for having to carry my burden.....because my job requires me to stay back late at the office. I did try sending my first born to a daycare but the care quality was just not up to my standard."

According to ^[19] parents have their own personal criteria for quality child care, and they can make the best choice for their family by selecting the child care which best matches their individual requirements. The lack of reliable child care could discouraged women from continuing working ^[18].

4.2 Labour Force Market Re-Entering

Interviews from respondents revealed that about 31% of them did not wish to return to work. It is found out that the higher a woman's value in the marriage market, the higher her value of time and the lower her labour supply ^[20]. This could explain the decision to permanently stop working as they placed a much higher value on their family time.

Nevertheless, another 37% of the respondents did mention about engaging in business activities once their children are big enough and not needed as much attention as they do now. Respondent 4, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 17 shared the same vision. Respondent 10 for example stated that:

“I plan to get involve in business one day, to be self-employed...after my children are independent enough to look after themselves.”

While the rest of the respondents were determined to return to work when the condition permits, as Respondent 3 stated that:

“I definitely will return to work, but not until my children is ready”.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Studies on female labour force participation, the employment barriers and the impact to economic growth have always been an interest to scholars in the academic world. This study shows that the marital status does not influence the decision to withdraw from the labour market as much as the motherhood does. Priority changed followed the maternity, shifting from focusing to career to focusing to mother related tasks. In the efforts of trying to balance between work and home responsibilities, sometimes left the married female graduates with no option rather than to exit the labour market. According to ^[21], when neither the work nor the prospects are rewarding, it is at this point that the woman begins to question whether the cost of juggling and the impact on their life as a whole is worth it. This scenario of female graduates choosing to stay at home after getting married or having children deteriorated female graduates labour force participation.

A closer look at the data from Malaysian Department of Statistics ^[22] revealed that of all the age categories in the labour force, the highest number of women who are housewives came from the category of 30 to 34 years of age. One reasonable explanation to the scenario is, in this category of age, women are raising their children; where most of the time they will have children under the age of 6 years old which need more attention and care. This is supported by the data from Malaysian Department of Statistics ^[2] where 64% of women stated that one of the reasons for not seeking work was due to the house related work.

There are three main factors need to be addressed in order to retain married female graduates from exiting the labour market. First, the rights and primary responsibility of women in taking care of their children cannot be denied. Thus, moral supports are very important in the transition phase of coming back to work after the maternity leave. ^[21] suggesting maternity coaching to reduce losing professional women from organizations. The coaching which refers to open discussion of the pressures and conflicts faced in the transition period, help female workers to understand and address the issues. Maternity coaching is also a good platform for sharing information and suggested ways to overcome the child rearing issues.

Second, organizational support is crucial especially in dealing with flexibilities in the working hours and arrangement of outstation meetings for the working mothers. Female workers with young children should be given some opportunities to adjust their hours to accommodate both work and home role duties so that the win-win situation could be accomplished. A more family-friendly work arrangement that suit the changing life style of these tertiary-educated working mothers might hinder the country from losing their valuable expertise and contribution to the economy. According to ^[23], employers and policymakers need to ensure that workplaces respond to employees' changing needs, and thus utilise the full range of human resources across society.

Third, it is suggested that there should be enough supply of child care centers and that the minimum standard of caretaker's requirements to be upgraded so that the quality of child care can be improved. A good high quality day care center is a must when they are granted with the exclusive custody rights given by the mothers to take care of their children. In Malaysia, there are two minimum standard requirements imposed by the legal authority on the caretakers of the registered child care centers.

They must be citizen of at least 18 years of age and to be at least passed the Basic Child Care Course^[24]. It is suggested that more intensive courses (especially on children psychology, handling young children etc) should be implemented and a random scheduled monitoring of the centers to be imposed. The issues of hygiene and cleanliness of the centers should also be emphasized as contagious diseases can easily be spread among children at the children day care centers^[25].

As recommendations, future research needs to expand the variability of the ethnicity of respondents for a more comprehensive finding. Different sampling method might be implemented as snow-ball or respondent-driven sampling technique has the tendency to accumulate narrow group of respondents. This might be due to the nature of snow-ball sampling where one respondent will help introduce prospect respondents with similar trait of interest which could be their acquaintances or close friends. The decision of graduate married mothers to re-enter the labour force market is seen as very crucial in the context of their economic contribution where further research is suggested to be carried out in order to understand the underlying factors determining the decision and to study the impact to the economy.

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