

The Productive and Non-(Re) productive Women : Sites of Economic Growth in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper is a critical revisit of the New Economic Policy and the New Population Policy of Malaysia. It attempts to inspect how a woman's body (fertility) and her labor has been the site or location from which the economic growth of the country was dependent on but has never been recognized. The paper examines women's contribution in the economy and their contribution to the economic growth of Malaysia. These contributions and changes were plotted against the changes in the policy domain with a focus on the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the New Population Policy (NPP) to see if there was any relationship between them. The paper also discusses that women have not always responded in line with policy calls especially in relation to their fertility but they have contributed significantly in the structural changes of the Malaysian economy. These responses are examined as a form of gender struggle within a fragmented and contradictory policy domain and within the context of very little gender equity/equality concerns in society and the policy domain. How these responses contributed in real terms to economic development and the overall growth of the country but with insignificant distributive effect for women contrary to the New Economic Policy's claim is critically analyzed in this paper.

Key words

productive work, reproductive work, fertility, population policy, affirmative action policy, economic growth

Introduction

The question of population and development is fundamental to the economic growth of a country. Population and development issues and policies are usually discussed in a variety of competing voices be it politi-

cal, moral, economic, demographic and social. The voices of women are the least audible in these discussions. At the heart of many national concerns about population and development stand the women almost always represented as being prepared to do her duty for the state. Within many population and development debates, a common theme - the reduction of women's bodies and labor to the status of national resource appears again and again. But women have not always responded in line with policy calls especially in relation to their fertility. How this contributed in real terms to economic development and the overall growth of the country is something that is not analyzed and always neglected. This paper looks at how women's body and her labor has been the site or location from which much of the growth of the country was dependent on but has never been recognized. This paper will examine the way policies that have an impact on women in terms of their labour force participation and the decline in fertility have been critical to Malaysia's economic growth. These transformations are usually associated with the changes in the role of women. The image of the productive women who chooses to control their reproductive capacity is often perceived and viewed negatively although they have contributed to the development and economic growth of the country. Policies encouraging increased female labour force participation and increased pressure to conform to the demands of the traditional family and the demands of the state to reproduce for the human resource and industrialization needs of the country - exist in a rather paradoxical way within the export-oriented economy of Malaysia. The complex inter-relationships of policies and choices and its consequences on the country's economic growth will be analyzed.

Revisiting the New Economic Policy and the New Population Policies

Initiatives and efforts in economic and social development in Malaysia began with the implementation of the country's First Five Year Plan (1956-1960). This and the subsequent economic plans focused on sustaining economic growth, infrastructure development, diversification of agriculture and industrial development. The New Economic Policy which was launched in 1971 had a two-pronged strategy of eradicating poverty and restructuring society so as to eliminate the identification of race and economic functions. It also involved affirmative action for the Malays to re-

duce inter-ethnic economic differences. The New Economic Policy objectives could only be achieved if there was a sustained economic growth and these the government planned to achieve through an increased public sector expenditure and based on export-oriented industrialization. This encouraged the urban-ward migration of young rural Malay women into the manufacturing sector.

None of the development Plans under the New Economic Policy which ended in 1990, gave any attention to issues and strategies for the advancement of women until the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) under the new National Development Policy with another ten-year Second Outline Prospective Plan from 1991-2000. It emphasized growth led by the private sector rather than by the public sector and focused on human resource development to achieve distributional objectives. Government initiatives and policies to increase Foreign Direct Investment led to the coming of Multinational Corporations into the country which provided employment. Most analyses of this have shown how cheap female labour was important for the growth of the manufacturing sector.

The government formulated the New Population Policy with the intention to supply the labour needed for the industrialization project but at the same time encouraged female labour force participation for immediate supply of labour. The contradiction of consequences of the two policies will be discussed later on in this article. In Malaysia, an explicit national population policy was first pronounced in the First Malaysia Plan 1966-1970, and the Family Planning Act of 1966 was passed. In line with the launching of the national heavy industrialization program, the New Population Policy (NPP) was implemented in 1984. Thus the NPP marks a fundamental shift in Malaysia's population policy from anti-natalism in the 1960s to the current perceived pro-natalism. Although the NPP was implemented on a voluntary basis, subsequent revisions in income tax rebates and maternity leave have been seen as incentives towards childbearing. Some of these changes such as the scope of tax relief not being limited to five children and maternity leave being increased from the first three children to five children after 1984 were considered to be the pro-natalist measures taken by the government. The Malays were found to be more responsive to the NPP. We can analyze these as the overriding power of developmental needs of the industrialization programs of Malaysia. However, overall fertility after the mid 1980s began

to decline again for all the ethnic groups irrespective of all the pro-natalist measures (Thambiah, Yong, & Lin, 2006). Instead of producing the labour force for the industries women themselves entered the labour market. This decline in fertility and the increased labour force participation of women especially in the manufacturing sector, the largest export sector of the economy, led to the growth of the country. In the following section the labour force participation of women in Malaysia is analyzed.

The Productive Women: Structural Changes in the Economy and Women's Employment

Female labour force participation rates have not undergone much change and have remained relatively constant as shown in Table 1. This pattern can be explained by unpaid care work and social pressure faced by women. However, there have been a considerable shift and a change in the nature of female employment. As mentioned above, export-led industrialization as a key development strategy of the late 70s and 80s brought a wave of women workers into the labor force. As a result, the participation rate of women in the labor force increased from 37.2 percent in 1970 to 47.8 percent in 1990, 47.2 percent in 2000, dropping to 45.7 in 2008. As Table 1 shows, since the late 1980s, women's participation in the labor force has remained more or less constant through the years.

Table 1.

Labour Force Participation Rate by Gender, 1975-2008, Malaysia

Gender	1970	1975*	1980	1990	2000	2002	2003	2004	2008
Male	79.3	86	85.9	85.3	83.1	81.5	82.1	80.9	79.0
Female	37.2	47.3	44.1	47.8	47.2	46.7	47.7	47.3	45.7
Malaysia		66.7	64.9	66.5	65.4	64.4	65.2	64.4	62.6

Note. From Labour Force Survey Report, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2001, 2003, 2007 & 2008.

* Data for 1975 are for Peninsular Malaysia.

Since independence in 1957 the number of women who have been employed for pay or were seeking employment has increased. Part of the increase may be accounted for simply the increase in the population and

the increase in the overall size of the economy. Besides that, changes in the global and national economy and pattern of employment also contributed to the increase in women's labour force participation in certain sectors of employment. Global capital's demand for cheap female labour was met by the government's call for women to be integrated in the development process. The structure of the Malaysian economy underwent changes due to these processes. Malaysia which heavily depended on agriculture in the period after independence till the 1960s shifted its focus to industry and services. With the decline in agriculture's share of the economy and an increase in manufacturing's share we begin to experience a move of women's employment from agriculture into manufacturing. Throughout the period 1975-2004, women have increasingly left employment in agriculture. There was a rapid growth in female employment in non-agricultural activities over the same period. This movement can be clearly seen in the decade 1980-1990 when the expansion of the manufacturing sector was at its peak. Female proportion in manufacturing grew rapidly during the decade 1980-90, but has since declined. Since 1990 there has been an increase in the share of female employment in both the wholesale and retail trade, hotels, and restaurants sector and the financial services sector (Malaysia, MDG, 2005). The changes in female employment followed the structural changes in the economy. This shift over the last three decades from an emphasis on agriculture to greater industrialization is reflected in Table 2a. In 1970 the percentage of women employment in the agricultural sector was 66.8 percent; by 1985 it fell to 33.7 percent; and by 2000 it was only 14.8 percent. However, women's involvement in production, transport, as equipment operator and labourers rose from 10.4 percent in 1970 to 17.7 percent in 1985 and it grew further to 26.5 percent in 1995 and declined to 22.6 percent in 2000. Since 2000 the percentage of women in these types of employment started to decline. Conversely the percentage of women as service workers has been steadily increasing over the same period (see Table 2a & 2b).

Table 2a.

Employment Distribution by Sex and Occupational Classification, 1970-2000 (percentage)

Occupational Status	1970		1980		1985		1990		1995		2000	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Professional, Technical & Related Workers	4.6	5.3	6.4	8.5	6.8	9.1	6.4	9.4	8.4	13.5	8.9	13.5
Administrative & Managerial Workers	1.0	0.1	1.4	0.3	3.2	0.6	2.8	0.6	4.4	1.9	4.7	2.2
Clerical & Related Workers	5.4	4.1	6.8	11.1	7.4	14.2	7.0	14.1	7.3	17.6	7.1	17.5
Sales & Related Workers	9.8	4.9	10.3	7.2	11.1	11.0	11.4	11.4	10.9	11.3	11.1	12.1
Service Workers	8.1	8.4	9.0	9.0	10.1	13.7	9.9	14.1	9.9	13.4	9.5	17.4
Agriculture, animal husbandry and forestry, fisherman and hunters	47.6	66.8	35.9	46.3	28.7	33.7	29.4	28.1	20.9	15.8	20.4	14.8
Production, Transport Equipment Operator & Laborers	23.5	10.4	30.2	17.6	32.7	17.7	33.1	22.3	38.2	26.5	38.4	22.6
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note. From Figures for 1970-1985 extracted from Sixth Malaysia Plan, 1991a; 1990-1995 from the Seventh Malaysia Plan, 1991b; 1996-2000 and 2000 from the Eighth Malaysia Plan, 2001a.

Table 2b.

Employment Distribution by Sex and Occupational Classification, 2000-2007 (percentage)

Occupational Category	2000		2001		2005		2007	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Legislators, senior officials & managers	8.0	4.6	9.0	4.6	9.4	5.4	9.3	5.2
Professionals	5.1	7.2	4.5	5.6	5.5	7.5	4.8	6.9
Technicians & associate professionals	10.9	14.1	11.8	12.5	12.6	14.0	12.3	13.7
Clerical workers	5.2	18.3	5.2	17.4	4.6	17.2	4.7	18.7
Service workers and shop and market sales	12.9	13.3	12.1	16.9	12.3	17.7	13.8	19.8
Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	17.5	10.0	14.7	11.4	14.7	9.9	15.0	9.4
Craft and related trades workers	11.5	4.4	16.1	5.5	15.2	5.0	14.9	4.2
Plant and machine operators & assemblers	16.2	15.8	16.4	14.7	15.9	11.5	14.3	10.0
Elementary occupations	12.7	12.1	10.2	11.5	9.8	11.8	11.0	12.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. From Labour Force Survey, 2000-2007. Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006.

It is clear that the participation of women has increased especially in the financial and social service sectors, commerce, trade and manufacturing. In the 1970s, agriculture contributed about one-third of the GDP but by 2003 manufacturing provided one-third, and agriculture had become less important (Malaysia, MDG, 2005). Besides the structural changes in the Malaysian economy this can also be linked to the result of women's access to education that in turn, encouraged migration of women from rural areas to urban areas and therefore, the decline of female labour in agriculture and mining in Malaysia (Morris, 1999). Since the manufacturing sector emerged as the leading economic sector, it has become the largest employer of women. As explained by Ariffin (1994), women in the labour market during the 1970s co-existed with the demands of 'off-shore' sourcing activities of Multinational Corporations (MNCs). The implementation of the New Economic Policy at the same time encouraged the urban-ward migration of young rural Malay women into the manufacturing sector (also in Thambiah, Yong, & Lin, 2006).

Women's labour has become a significant component of the Malaysian economy. As the Malaysian economy grew through the government's industrialization program and due to changes that were taking place in the global economy a great emphasis was put on manufacturing. With that, the demand for women's labour increased substantially in this sector. The move from agriculture to non-agricultural forms of employment for women and men is shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Average Annual Growth Rates of Employment in Agriculture and Non-Agriculture Sector

Period	Agriculture (%)		Non-agriculture (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1975-1980	-1.6	-2.1	4.6	6.1
1980-1990	1.4	-0.5	3.8	6.4
1990-2002	-1.6	-4.4	4.3	4.7

Note. From Malaysia, MDG, 2005.

The nature of women's employment has kept up with the expansion and the changes in the economy. We could also say that the expansion of the economy is also the result of the changes in women's employment

and their involvement in sectors that were the main contributors to the GDP of the country. From being predominantly a rural agricultural society in 1970, Malaysia has since moved into being an industrial society with sustained albeit variable economic growth. Average growth rate of real GDP was seven percent over the last three and a half decades as shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Annual Growth Rates of Gross Domestic Product, Malaysia Five-Year Plan Periods

Five Year Plan	Average annual growth rate of real GDP (%)
1 st 1966-1970	5.4
2 nd 1971-1975	7.1
3 rd 1976-1980	8.6
4 th 1981-1985	5.8
5 th 1986-1990	6.7
6 th 1991-1995	8.7
7 th 1996-2000	4.7
8 th 2001-2005	7.5*

Note. From Henderson, Hukme, Philips & Ainur, 2002; adapted from Malaysia, MDG, 2005.

* estimated

The continued economic development of Malaysia - from an agricultural to a goods producing and more recently to a service providing economy - has increased the employment of women in these sectors.

The Productive and Reproductive Women: The Juggling of Productive and Reproductive Work

We have seen small improvements in women's participation in paid employment but when women's labour force participation and employment over the life cycle or age groups is graphed, we see high rates in the young adult stages before childbearing and low rates in the child rearing years as reflected in Table 5. Some women still leave the labour force on marriage and childbirth especially from the age group 20-24

to 25-29 to 30-34 but for the same age group there is an increase in the labour force participation and the employment of males. It is clear that by comparing the figures for the age category 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 for both males and females we can see that there is an increase in male participation and a stabilizing of their employment rates but the reverse is happening for females whereby there is a substantive decline in the percentage (five-six percent) of women employed in the age group 25-29 to 30-34. The female age cohort labour force participation profile shows a single peak pattern from 1990, 1995 and 2000 and the peak was in the age cohort 20-24 but the peak shifted to the age cohort 25-29 from the year 2001 onwards while male age cohort labour force participation profile shows more of a plateau. The male participation rate plateau shows that the prime working age of 25 to 44 for men was close to a 100 percent participation rate. The exit from the workforce for women is most likely due to marriage and child rearing. Besides marriage, childbearing and childrearing this trend raises questions about whether marital status has an impact on the employability of women (Thambiah, 2003).

The responses of women have also been rather contradictory. They conform to some extent to mainstream policy requirements or prescriptions. This can clearly be seen especially for Malay women. The overall ideology of the reproductive responsibility of women can be seen to continue (see Devasahayam, 2004). Childbearing and child rearing still impact on the labour force participation of women. The clash in values and in policy prescriptions between the need to be productive and to be reproductive is reflected in these statistics. These statistics also challenge the negatively perceived view of productive women as being non-(re)productive for women are still leaving their jobs for reproductive work. Whether women's labour force participation is still under the control of the traditional ideology of women's reproductive role will be discussed further in the next section.

Table 5.
Labor Force Participation Rates by Gender and Age Group, Malaysia, 1990, 1995, 2000-2008

		Age Group		15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64
Sex			Total										
Total													
	1990	(%)	66.5	40.7	76.9	75.3	73.8	73.5	74.6	74.4	68.6	52.4	44.4
	1995		64.7	32.5	75.4	75.5	73.8	74.3	73.3	72.0	65.8	50.7	41.0
	2000		65.4	27.1	73.9	79.3	76.5	75.5	75.9	74.5	68.0	52.2	41.3
	2001		64.9	25.8	72.0	79.4	76.9	76.2	76.1	73.7	68.0	52.4	40.0
	2002		64.4	23.9	70.3	79.9	76.7	76.0	75.7	73.1	67.8	52.3	40.9
	2003		65.2	24.2	71.6	80.8	77.8	76.3	75.8	75.4	69.0	53.4	42.0
	2004		64.4	22.9	67.6	80.3	78.4	76.6	75.5	75.3	68.8	53.2	41.4
	2005		63.3	20.6	66.8	80.6	78.0	75.8	75.1	73.6	67.0	49.6	37.2
	2006		63.1	19.0	66.8	81.1	78.3	75.9	74.9	73.2	67.0	49.6	38.5
	2007		63.2	18.5	65.8	81.1	78.6	76.7	75.5	73.8	68.4	49.9	37.6
	2008		62.6	18.4	64.9	80.6	78.5	76.3	75.2	72.8	67.2	47.7	36.7
Male													
	1990		85.3	47.3	90.1	97.7	98.6	98.8	98.5	97.6	93.5	72.7	62.6
	1995		84.3	37.9	89.5	97.9	98.3	98.6	98.0	97.2	93.6	73.4	62.0
	2000		83.0	32.1	85.2	97.5	98.5	98.6	98.2	97.8	93.3	74.0	60.9
	2001		82.3	31.0	83.1	97.3	98.4	98.5	98.1	97.4	93.0	74.2	58.6
	2002		81.5	28.3	81.0	97.0	98.1	98.6	98.0	96.7	93.2	73.6	60.3
	2003		82.1	29.7	81.1	97.1	98.5	98.7	98.1	97.6	93.7	74.3	62.0
	2004		80.9	27.7	77.9	96.2	98.3	98.2	97.8	97.3	92.4	72.5	60.0
	2005		80.0	24.6	77.1	96.6	98.1	98.3	97.9	96.7	92.6	69.5	54.3
	2006		79.9	23.3	77.2	96.5	97.6	98.5	98.2	96.9	91.7	70.3	56.8
	2007		79.5	22.8	76.6	95.7	97.8	98.1	97.8	96.8	91.7	70.8	54.5
	2008		79.0	22.1	76.1	95.4	97.5	98.1	97.3	96.4	91.0	67.7	54.6
Female													
	1990		47.8	33.8	63.3	53.3	50.4	48.9	50.1	50.3	43.1	33.1	27.0
	1995		44.7	26.8	61.1	52.8	49.0	49.2	47.6	45.3	36.9	27.4	21.5
	2000		47.2	22.1	63.1	61.2	53.5	51.0	52.1	49.3	40.2	28.3	22.1
	2001		46.8	20.6	60.7	61.1	54.7	53.1	52.9	48.4	40.9	28.8	21.3
	2002		46.7	19.4	59.4	62.6	54.8	52.6	52.3	50.3	40.4	29.2	21.2
	2003		47.7	18.5	61.8	64.2	56.7	53.1	52.5	52.0	42.5	30.8	21.6
	2004		47.2	18.0	56.8	64.1	58.1	54.2	52.3	52.1	43.6	32.4	22.0
	2005		45.9	16.4	56.2	64.3	57.5	52.7	51.4	49.3	39.9	28.5	19.3
	2006		45.8	14.5	56.1	65.4	58.5	52.6	50.9	48.4	40.9	27.7	19.5
	2007		46.4	14.0	54.6	66.2	59.0	54.7	52.6	49.8	43.9	28.0	20.0
	2008		45.7	14.6	53.4	65.5	59.2	54.1	52.4	48.2	42.1	26.8	18.1

Note. From Labor Force Survey, 1990, 1995, 2000-2008.

The Reproductive Women: Marriage and the Family

There are still large numbers of women who are leaving the work force due to marriage and family formation (see Table 5) which indicate that even if changes are taking place in the economy they are slow to take place in the societal context in terms of transformation of gender ideologies and gender inequalities. The reproductive responsibility of women continues with very little change as reflected in Table 6, which shows that the main reason women are not seeking work is housework. According to a time use study conducted by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, women performed 75 percent of housework such as childcare, cooking and house cleaning (Bernama, 2005). As shown in research done elsewhere, responsibility for children impacts on women's and men's paid and unpaid household work. Time use surveys reveal gendered impacts with changes in women's paid and unpaid work much greater than those for men. Women who become mothers whether in paid work or not, undertake more than a full working week's worth of unpaid work, and their paid work drops dramatically (Craig, 2005, 2002; Craig & Bittman, 2005; Pocock, 2003).

Table 6.

Percentage Distribution of Persons Outside Labour Force by Sex and Reasons for not Seeking Work, Malaysia 2001-2007

Reasons for not seeking work	2001			2003			2007		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Schooling	35.1	68.1	23.7	37.1	68.6	25.9	37.8	65.0	27.1
Housework	54.7	3.4	72.4	52.2	2.6	69.7	49.0	2.4	67.4
Going for further studies	1.2	2.2	0.8	1.2	2.4	0.8	1.5	2.5	1.1
Disabled	1.6	4.2	0.7	1.5	3.6	0.8	1.7	4.1	0.8
Not interested	0.6	1.7	0.3	0.6	1.4	0.3	0.6	1.6	0.3
Retired	4.0	13.5	0.7	4.4	14.3	0.8	5.3	15.4	1.3
Others	2.8	6.8	1.4	3.1	7.1	1.7	4.1	9.1	2.0

Note. From Labour Force Survey Report, 2001, 2003, 2007.

However, women are making choices that are impacting on the economy and the demography of the country. Malaysia devoted large amounts of resources to public education which contributed to females and males remaining longer at schools. In terms of educational outcomes (enrolment rates, literacy rates, average schooling) Malaysia has seen tremendous improvements. Development policies focusing on education have had an impact on women's employment i.e. the movement from agriculture to non-agricultural activities and from unpaid to paid employment. It has also had an impact on age at first marriage and fertility.

Age at first marriage is rising globally and this trend can be seen among Malaysian women and men (Table 7). The age at first marriage has been rising steadily across birth and marriage cohorts. The mean age at first marriage showed an increase from 28.2 years in 1991 to 28.6 years in 2000 for males while for females the increase was from 24.7 years to 25.1 years over the same period. Just like in other parts of the world, the rising age at marriage among women are explained as likely a result of rapid increase in educational opportunities especially for girls which, may have resulted in delayed marriage to enable them to complete their schooling. Education has indeed changed women's attitudes and aspirations towards marriage besides opening doors for participation in the labour market and urban life (Rahman, 2000). Further postponement of marriage may have occurred because of increasing female independence and freedom in the choice of marriage partners (Chang & Ng, 1995).

The effect of ethnicity in Malaysia is still very significant on age at first marriage though the differentials have narrowed especially in the later cohorts. Abdul Rahman (2000) attributed the narrower gap in Malaysia to the rapid rise in age at first marriage among the Malays, as compared to the Indians and Chinese. The Malays, having the privileges in terms of education and socio-economic activities, have now become more urbanised and educated which have consequent effect in the rapid rise in age at first marriage. However, the Malays still have the lowest age at first marriage followed by the Indians while the Chinese are still the latest to marry (see Table 7) (Thambiah, Yong, & Lin, 2006).

Table 7.

Singulate Mean Age at First Marriage, Malaysia, 1970-2000

Ethnic Group	1970	1991		2000	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Malays	21.0	27.5	24.6	27.9	24.8
Chinese	24.2	29.8	26.3	30.6	27.0
Indians	21.7	28.3	25.5	28.8	25.4
Total	22.0	28.2	24.7	28.6	25.1

Note. From Population and Housing Census 1991, 2000, figures for 1970 by Tey, 2009.

Clearly Malaysians are marrying later today. As the average age at first marriage has increased over the last forty years, the proportion of males and females in their twenties and early thirties who are unmarried has also increased. The number of unmarried people in our population is influenced as much by divorce as it is by postponement of marriage. The number of divorced women should be greater than divorced men because women are less likely than men to remarry after divorce. The impact of divorce on the size of the unmarried population needs to be analysed and taken seriously into consideration by policy makers.

The desirability of marriage from a women's point of view is certainly not enhanced by the cultural expectations that women should continue to do most of the housework even if they work full time (ESCAP, 1999). There is also a lack of government policies and programmes to facilitate women's combining of childrearing and full time work even under the NEP. No policy or programmes have been formulated to increase men's involvement in childrearing either. Even public discourses on these issues are lacking. Moreover, Jones points out that the lack of intimacy in marriages is making marriages less popular with women. Women are less satisfied with their marriages than are men (Jones, 2005, p. 37).

The transformation of intimacy as postulated by Giddens (1992) with radical consequences for the gender order is still very far out of reach for women and men in Malaysia. Giddens's transformation of intimacy has been critiqued for its lack of sociological explanation for much of personal life that still remains structured by inequalities (Jamieson, 1999, p. 477). These discussions and discourses are completely muted in the population

and development policy domain of Malaysia although they are very relevant in public and social policy considerations. The choices women are making in terms of delaying marriage, not marrying and having smaller family size can be directly related to gender inequalities and to the gender struggles in society. These choices and struggles of women have contributed to the demographic change of the country which has a positive impact on the economic performance of the country, which will be discussed later on in the article.

Not marrying as a choice or the 'singles' phenomenon is becoming more visible. Traditionally, women are expected to marry someone who is more qualified and educated than themselves, or at least, of equivalent status quo. However, educated women find themselves having problems finding suitable partners or even partners who would uphold egalitarian values. Therefore, many remain unmarried throughout their lives as will be discussed in the following section.

The Non-(Re) productive Women: The Singles Phenomena

The single person who has never married is typically thought of as a young person who has not yet found a partner. But single, never married people can be of any age and can have a range of social and demographic characteristics.

As young adults tend to marry at a later age, consequently, the proportion of never married (single) persons continue to increase. In Malaysia, singles aged 20-34 years continued to increase between 1991 and 2000 from 43.2 percent to 48.1 percent. Among females 20-24 years of age, 68.5 percent were single in 2000 compared to only 60.2 percent in 1991. Similar patterns were also observed for females in the 30-34 age group, as well as among males.

The percentage of never-married population in Malaysia for those aged 15 years and over for the year 2000 are 39.5 percent for males and 31.3 percent for females. Many never-married adults, especially those between the ages of 15 and 24, might still live with their parents. Most of the others might live in dormitories, apartments, or houses with people of similar ages. Such living arrangements are very common today among people in their twenties. These households often include groups of friends or roommates who live together while attending university or college.

They could also be young people establishing themselves in their career. Independently living away from family also impedes and hinders marriage for the pressures from parents to marry is not as severe as if young people lived with them. Studies and work that takes young people away from families could also impact the rise in the numbers of never married adults. The proportion of Malay brides whose marriages were arranged halved over the 1960s and 1970s, and the remnants of the arranged marriage system among Chinese virtually disappeared over the same period (Jones, 1994).

These young people may have many different reasons for not being married. Most intend to marry someday, but have not yet found the right person. Intimate relationships not legitimised by marriage are to some extent tolerated. Ready availability of contraception means that sex without marriage is a more viable option for unmarried men and women (Jones, 2005, p. 16-17). Many are also not interested in marriage, perhaps because the single lifestyle they are leading is very satisfying.

Discourses about the overly productive and non-(re)productive single women and also married women who control their reproductive capacity, are said to be driven by pleasure and therefore seen as non economic but this is baseless. Government anti-natalist policies supported by the family planning programmes and the emergence of new reproductive technologies were the initiators of the positioning of sexuality for its own sake. Pressures to have large families, characteristic of all the ethnic groups in Malaysia, gave way to a tendency to limit family size. Such practices reflected in demographic statistics as declining fertility rates has its ramification on sexuality for it differentiated sex and reproduction. Transformation of feminine sexuality perceived negatively as sexuality for its own sake contributed to raising social and economic efficiency. The separation of sexuality from pregnancy and childbirth freed women to be productive in society as well as within the economy.

The (Re)-productive Women: Fertility Decline

Malaysia has experienced fertility transition beginning in the 1960s and it continues to decline throughout the 1990s. Total fertility rate declined from 4.9 per woman in 1970 to 3.4 per woman in 1995 (see Table 8). The trend can be attributed to the older age of women at marriage, in-

creasing proportion of singles, and social and economic advancements such as higher education and greater participation of women in the labour force (Chang & Ng, 1995) and also the choices women made due to gender inequalities as discussed earlier. It should also be noted that ethnicity and location marked the variation in fertility pattern. Differentials in fertility level were found between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak) with higher declines being recorded for the former (Zulkifli, Shiub, Abdullah, & Low, 1995). Similarly, based on the vital statistics in Peninsular Malaysia, higher fertility was observed in the east coast in contrast to the west coast (Thambiah, Yong, & Lin, 2006).

Table 9.

Total Fertility Rate by Ethnic Group in 1970, 1980, 1985, 1990, 1995, and 1999

Ethnic Group	1957	1960	1965	1970	1980	1985	1990	1995	2001	2006
Malays	6.1	5.7	5.5	5.1	4.5	4.8	4.1	3.9	3.4	2.8
Chinese	7.4	6.3	5.6	4.6	3.1	2.7	2.3	2.5	2.2	1.8
Indians	8.0	7.3	6.7	4.8	3.4	2.9	2.6	2.7	2.4	1.9
Others	-	5.3	4.4	4.3	3.0	3.5	3.8	2.9	n/a	n/a
Total	6.7	6.0	5.6	4.9	3.9	3.9	3.3	3.4	n/a	2.4

Note. From Vital Statistics Time Series, 2001b: Peninsular Malaysia 1911-1985, Vital Statistics Malaysia 1999, Tey, 2009 for 2001 and 2006 data.

1. Including other bumiputera
- 2 Including non-Malaysian citizens
 - a. Vital statistics data for 1957, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1985, and 1990 is based on Peninsular Malaysia only. No data is available for Sabah and Sarawak yet. This however is representative to Malaysia as a whole since 84 % of the population resides in Peninsular Malaysia.
 - b. Data presented in 1995, 1999 is for Malaysia. Separate data on fertility rate by ethnic groups for Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak is not available.
 - c. n/a - not available

Ethnic groups in Malaysia continue to have different fertility levels. Besides that a person's position in the socioeconomic structure of a society is one of the most enduring factors related to childbearing. Women in lower social classes generally have more children than do women in

the middle and upper classes. This is regardless of whether socioeconomic status is measured by educational level, occupational prestige, or income. However, the level of educational attainment is the measure most closely related to fertility.

The stalling of Malay fertility decline has been due to higher marital fertility associated with third, fourth and fifth births, despite an increase in the marriageable age of Malay women. Significantly, both religious and political factors have been said to be the causes for the pause in Malay fertility transition during the late 1970s and the first half of 1980s (Leete & Tan, 1993; Wong, 1995). For instance, the decline in contraception use among Malay couples since 1980, which accounted for the increase in fertility in 1985, was due to Islamic revivalist influences (Chan, 1992). Moreover, the increase in Malay fertility in 1985 had been attributed to the relatively positive Malay response to the pronatalist New Population Policy (NPP) implemented in 1984 (Arshat, Tan, Tey, & Subbiah, 1988; Tey, 1992).

Viewing the data from Table 8, the Malays started out with lower fertility than the other two ethnic groups in the 1960s. Subsequently, Chinese fertility levels dropped to a much lower level than the Indians or Malays (including other bumiputeras¹) beginning from the 1970s and it continued to drop to the current levels. In determining the factors influencing differential in fertility transition between three ethnic groups, two government policies can be interpreted, that is the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the New Population Policy (NPP). Under the NEP, Malays were given privilege in areas of education, employment and access to ownership of assets whereas the Chinese and Indian minorities have limited access to economic and educational opportunities, thus indirectly increasing the cost of raising and educating children. Nonetheless, it instituted the preference of non-Malays for smaller family size (Pong, 1994). However, such an upward trend among the Malays was temporary and subsequently followed by a continued but slower decline (Chang & Ng, 1995). The different ethnic groups have undergone a different pace of fertility transition. The total fertility rate of the Malays had been declining at about 1.1 percent per annum as compared to about three per-

¹ Bumiputera means son of the soil /land. Other Bumiputera are indigenous groups from Sabah and Sarawak and indigenous Orang Asli groups from the Peninsular of Malaysia.

cent each for the Chinese and Indians. Ethnic fertility differentials widened somewhat between 1977 and 1987 with an increase in Malay fertility, but has become less pronounced in the 1990s and more recently as Malay fertility resumed its downward trend, while that of the Chinese and Indians showed a slight increase in 1995 (Tey, 2002, also in Thambiah, Yong, & Lin, 2006). However, since 1995 it has resumed its downward trend.

There are some major concerns that are yet to be answered on the subject of fertility decline. Should we continue to examine fertility decline as a characteristic of the population rather than of persons? There is very little attention given in the policy domain to the relationship of gender inequalities with fertility decline. The potential for change in gender relations indicated in the falling birth rates is clear but at the same time labour force participation of women is still very much influenced by child birth and child rearing. Has the realm of the personal changed in Malaysia - falling birth rate indicates that it is changing but a decline in women's labour force participation within the child birth and child rearing age cohort shows otherwise. Can we say confidently that low fertility is the natural outcome of gender equality? Can Malaysia achieve equality between the sexes and maintain sufficient fertility?

Nancy Folbre argues that the transition to capitalism modifies some traditional patriarchal inequalities increasing the cost of children to parents and to men in particular. She explains that the transition to capitalism leads to the genesis of new motives and mechanisms for control over women's labour power. Besides that it diminishes patriarchal authority over adult children and therefore reduces the economic benefits of large families which weakened resistance to women's demands for control over their own reproduction and modifies the traditional sexual division of labour. Both these changes, in turn, contributed to the continuing process of fertility decline. However, in order not to undermine women's agency she also asserts that inequalities between women and men persist but they do not persist unabated (Folbre, 1983). Folbre and Nelson (2000) also argue that efforts to combine paid work and family responsibilities lead to stresses and strains. When married mothers increase their hours of market work, husbands seldom increase their hours of nonmarket work to help (Hartmann, 1981; Bittman & Pixley, 1997 cited in Folbre & Nelson, 2000; also see Craig, 2006). Furthermore, Lyn Craig and Peter

Siminski's (2010) study on the relationship between gender inequality in unpaid work within the household and falling fertility rates found that there is a direct relationship between the housework time performed by partnered women and the probability of future fertility. This means that a woman's own domestic time commitment is more important to whether or not she has another baby than the amount of housework her husband does. In countries where women can access education and market work on relatively equal terms with men, but are not as readily able to participate after motherhood, fewer children will be born. Craig and Siminski (2010) show that the lesson most widely taken from this is that social policies that facilitate mother's continued workforce participation are those most likely to encourage fertility (Sevilla Sanz & de Laat, 2006; McDonald, 2006; cited in Craig & Siminski, 2010). Such social policies are still lacking in Malaysia and if government does not take this seriously fertility rates will continue to decline in Malaysia.

The following section will show how these contradictory consequences of policies and choices women made have contributed positively to the economy.

Women's Labour and Body as Sites of Economic Growth

Accounting for women's productive contribution to the economy and for the fertility choices that she makes is an important challenge for theories of development and for public policy. Demographic change can affect the economic performance of a country. Countries that undergo fertility transition experience a rise in the level of output per capita, due to the fact that increase in the labour force is faster than the growth of the population as a whole. Bloom and Williamson (1998) argue that this cohort effect accounts for a large proportion of East Asia's "economic miracle" between 1960 and 1990.

Countries with slower population growth rates have higher savings and investment ratios and faster growing per capita income than countries with rapid population growth. With fewer children, households placed more of their earnings in savings and governments reduced public expenditures. As growth in the labour force slowed down, both wages and capital investment rose. Wages rose as continued economic development created demand for labour and unemployment rates went down.

Malaysia experienced these processes to some level but besides the cohort effect, the structural changes in the economy and the change in the nature of women's employment positively contributed to the economic growth of the country. Malaysia achieved record levels of growth based largely on the labour of women workers in the export industries. Women workers dominated the export sectors. For example in 1993, women accounted for 71.3 percent of the workforce in the manufacture of electrical machinery (see ILO 1999, Table 6.9). Alexander (1999, p. 31) points out that it was women's cheap labour that gave Southeast Asia's export industries a 'competitive edge' in the global market (Wee, 1999). As discussed earlier in this article Malaysian women moved into growth sectors of the economy and development programmes under the New Economic Policy started to mention women as recipients of development. The distributional effect of such a move was emphasised as fulfilling the distributional objectives of the NEP i.e. the move of the Malays from agricultural activities to non-agricultural activities. However, women were not merely recipients of development but were also the agents of growth and development in terms of their cheap labour force contribution to the growth sectors of the economy. Part of Malaysia's economic growth was worked out through women's body and labour.

The Clash of Policies: NEP's and NPP's Failure to Address Gender Inequality

When gender is not taken into account policies end up clashing for example a policy calling for a better distribution of wealth and another working towards an increase in the population of the very people who were intended to benefit from the redistribution of the wealth of the nation.

It is important to mention that problems persist in the quality of the entry of women into the labor market, as well as strong inequalities in comparison with men. The volume of employment generated by the Malaysian economy has not been sufficient to absorb the increasing need and willingness of women to work, especially among the poorest sectors of the population. Although women were entering the labor market their employment was concentrated in a relatively small number of female-stereotypical areas and occupations which tend to attract lower rewards and

less prestige. The majority were involved in manufacturing and sales or services jobs. More than half of all employed women are in these two sectors till today. Women are also largely in low-quality jobs. A greater number of working women find themselves in the lower return to labor jobs and/or occupational status.

Since female labor force participation rates have remained rather constant with very little change during the NEP period and beyond we can say that the distributive effort of the NEP in terms of employment of females has been minimal although the growth rate during the NEP was impressive. Women were shuffled around in the labor market which benefited the economy and contributed to growth but this happened with minimal gains for women themselves.

The country benefited from the growth but NEP's claim of fulfilling its distributional objective especially to women was undermined by the contradictory effects of the New Population Policy (NPP). One possible reason behind the minimal distributional effect of NEP from the gender perspective was due to its clash with the NPP. If we plot total fertility rate against growth of GDP we can see that the period when Malay fertility rose from 4.5 in 1980 to 4.8 in 1985 saw a lower average annual growth rate of real GDP at 5.8 percent. It was during the Fourth Malaysia Plan that this contradiction in policies emerged and Malaysia experienced its slowest growth rate.

Endogenous fertility differentials between the ethnic groups, between the states (between the East and West Coast) and between the classes undermine the distributional impact of the NEP especially towards Malay women who responded positively to the NPP. Fertility differentials between the different ethnic groups, between different classes and between different states continue to play an important role in persistent income inequalities observed in Malaysia. The upward fertility trend among the Malays was temporary and subsequently declined but it was a slower decline compared to the Chinese and the Indians. Ethnic fertility differentials widened somewhat between 1977 and 1987 with an increase in Malay fertility, but have become less pronounced in the 1990s as Malay fertility resumed its downward trend.

Although fertility differentials contributed to the unequal growth of the per capita income between the ethnic groups and the different states but the country as a whole experienced a decline in fertility rates and

this had a positive impact on growth. Women's labor and body are undoubtedly sites of economic growth. However, her share of this growth has been minimal for she was paid poorly for her labor and had to bear the negative image of the non-(re)productive women for her choice of controlling her reproductive capacity. It was the poorer women especially Malay women and the non-productive women who continued to have larger families as shown in household size by state and total fertility rate by state. States that have a higher rate of poverty and more of its population living in rural areas have higher household size and fertility rate. For example states like Kelantan and Terengganu have the highest fertility rate in the country. While Penang and Kuala Lumpur which are more urban and developed have the lowest fertility rate. This will lead to greater inequality between women and between women and men. This can also be used to explain the regional and intra-ethnic inequalities.

Approaches that credit government policies and economic programs alone for growth without due recognition given to women's contribution and their choices are missing out on the potential for a just theorizing and practice of development.

Conclusion

Changes in the global economy due to the new international division of labour and its influence in the national economy and patterns of employment have an impact on women. The cultural and economic changes of the 60s, 70s and 80s were facilitated by unprecedented economic growth through foreign direct investment which led to a demand for labour that could not be supplied by traditional sources. Consequently women's participation in the growth sectors of the economy contributed to economic growth enjoyed by Malaysia.

The impact of women's employment on changes in family life, together with control over fertility, can not be underestimated. There is no doubt that there have been changes in gender relations initiated by women due to the persistent gender inequalities in society. Besides linking fertility decline to increasing industrialization and urbanization we can also 'read' changing fertility patterns imaginatively as sites of contestation where relations between women and men were undergoing some change where most of this change can be seen in women's behaviour and choices

and not that much in men's behaviours. Changes in relations between men and women categorised by Giddens (1992) as 'a transformation of intimacy' reveal there is an impact of the private domain of gender relations on the arena of public policy. Folbre (1983) sees the failure to incorporate consideration of changing power relations between men and women into discussions of fertility decline as a critical omission. These discussions are certainly relevant to the practice of population and development policies but it is still very silent in the public and policy domain of Malaysia. In Malaysia the narrative that fertility is part of women's duty to the state can still be heard however, at the same time individual preferences and choices of women to undertake paid work in the face of few gender equity policies has led to low birth rates. Public discourses by the state and conservative institutions have perceived and labelled the productive and non(re)-productive women negatively as driven by greed and pleasure without due recognition given to their contribution to the growth of the economy and the development of the country.

The reason for needing to be clear about development and population policies, their outcomes, and women's role and contribution in it and to it is to propose that it might be in the interest of all parties concerned to have the gender perspective in the formulation stage of any policy. It is a concern that women be offered compatible policies rather than mixed messages from a fragmented and often contradictory policy arena. A new generation of population and development related policies based on principles of justice, equality and equity for women and men is hoped.

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