

CHILD SAFETY MATTER: FACTORS AFFECTING THE PARTICIPATION OF EDUCATED MOTHERS IN THE LABOUR MARKET

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ABSTRACT

The labour force participation rate (LFPR) among women in Malaysia has remained low for four decades compared to a few countries in ASEAN countries. Despite the increase, it is still at a low level. Most literature prove that this situation is closely related to the presence of children. Women with small children are more likely not to work due to child care issues. For that reason, this qualitative research explored the child care matter that affecting mother participation in labour market. In-depth interview with nine educated married women have proven the theme arise where the safety of children had been the main reason that create their anxieties. Besides anxiety by their own experience, a concern was raised with the information from other people's experiences that were reported by the media. Many media reports highlighted child abused cases and neglected by their guardians when parents work. An interview with three experts in the field has confirmed this finding. Then, educated mother choose to stop working as it becomes the best thing to do to avoid a greater risk on the safety of their children. However, deciding to give priority to the safety of children means participation of mothers in the labour market as an opportunity cost.

Keyword : Child safety, participation of educated mothers, labour market

INTRODUCTION

The rate of female participation in the labor market has indeed improved at present compared to Malaysia after independence. At that time, Malaysia focused on the expansion of education opportunities for all genders and races. The subsequent industrial era increased employment opportunities. However, since 1980s, the female participation rate in the labor market had been identified to be less than 50.0 percent for many years.

Table 1 shows the female labour force participation rate (LFPR) for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in 2017. The female LFPR in Malaysia was 55.0 percent in 2017, while the nearest neighbours, such as Thailand, was at 68.0 percent, Singapore was with 69.0 percent and Brunei at 62.0 percent. Myanmar has the same rate (55.0) and only Indonesia (53.0) and the Philippines (51.0) have lower rates than Malaysia.

For Malaysia, low participation rate was due to the unavailability of women in the labour market (Mohd Amin, P.Rameli, Othman, Ab Hasan, & Ibrahim, 2017). Based on Malaysian achievement in Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), more than half of women in the working age group were outside the field of labour force, with around 70.0 percent of these women cited housework as the main reason (United Nations Development Programme, 2011).

Table 1 : Female LFPR by ASEAN countries, 2017

Countries	Female Participation Rate
Cambodia	83.0
Laos	81.0
Vietnam	79.0
Thailand	68.0
Singapore	69.0
Brunei	62.0
Malaysia	55.0
Myanmar	55.0
Indonesia	53.0
Philippines	51.0

Sources : <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS>

Strong social norms that see women as being primarily responsible for the home and children, with men as a breadwinner, have made it difficult for women to combine employment with family responsibilities (M.Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2015). The presence of children especially at younger age has a negative and significant effect on the hours worked of a mother. Besides, it was also reported that married women who left the workforce did not return to work due to difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities beside lost their skill and experience (World Bank, 2012).

For married women with a family, they have an additional responsible of child care (Rohaiza, 2009). Those who need to work, child care arrangement needs to be done. Issue of high child care costs has become a main burdened to the family, especially those with many children. Thus, there are many researches related to the cost of childcare. However, even in Mediterranean countries, there is limited number of research investigated on how child care arrangements give an impact on mother's employment (Nicodemo & Waldmann, 2009).

Among a few matters related to the issue of childcare arrangement, safety of childcare being an important issue. Various issues related to child safety in childcare have resulted in anxiety among mothers who want to work. Many choose not to work and leave their career despite having a tertiary education background and are able to earn a high income if they work. If these educated women work, many personal benefits (such as higher household income, improved quality of my life) and benefits to society (such as reducing unemployment rate, increasing GDP and national income, increase the numbers of educated and skilled workers in a country) are obtained.

However, In recent years, many incidents related to the safety of children reported on the mass media. On June 12, 2018, a three-month-old baby girl was found to have fractured bones. Adam Rayqal (five months) was found dead in the refrigerator on July 3, 2018, Yusof Al-Baihakki (four month) died for choking milk on July 23, 2018. On August 25, 2018, Ummar Zaidan (four month) was diagnosed with bleeding brain and eyes.

To those with high educational attainment, is anxiety about child safety matter relates to their participation in labour force? For that reason, this study aims to *discover the real problems faced by educated mother in relation to child care safety matter*. This study will be started with a literature review on the mother's labour force participation rate in the labour market and followed by literature review on child safety matters. The data obtained from the two series of interviews will be analysed and discussed before the findings can be concluded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section is divided into two. The first part is to look at literary studies on the rate of participation of mother in the labour market while the second part focuses on the safety aspects of children.

i. Mother's labour force participation rate influenced by child's factor

Generally, participation of women in the labour market increases with the rising level of their education level. In Malaysia, compared to thirty years ago, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) for less educated women had decreased, while the participation rate for those more educated had increased (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). These reflect the fact that women in Malaysia have benefited from equal access to education and the rising level of education plays a major role in drawing them into the labour market (Mohd Amin & P.Rameli, 2015; Rahmah & Fatimah, 1999).

However, the increased participation of women in Malaysia's labour market has not been encouraging and it has increased very slightly. 41.2 percent of people outside labour force give reason not to work due to housework and family responsibility (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018) Based on opinions given by many researchers, the issues of child care are the reason that hinders women from participating in the labour market. (Hotchkiss, Pitts, & Walker, 2008; Ismail & Sulaiman, 2014; Lee & Lee, 2014; Mohd Amin, P.Rameli, Ab Hamid, Abdul Razak, & Abd Wahab, 2016).

Mahoney (1961) stated that birth of children placed a premium upon the wife's presence in the home and the mother who continued to work. Hotchkiss, Pitts, & Walker (2008) made a conclusion from their analysis that women seemed to be responding rationally to the costs and benefits associated with the decision to exit the labour market at the birth of a child. Therefore, women had become increasingly likely and potentially to exit from workforce upon the birth of a child (Hotchkiss, Pitts, & Walker, 2010).

Ackah et al. (2009) highlighted that the larger the number of children a woman had, the less likely she would participate in paid work. Agreed by Chaudhry & Jabeen (2010), the empirical result portrayed that the number of children inversely correlated with women's participation in labour force. Based on a study in Malaysia, the number of children was another important obstacle for married women to be in the workforce because they have an additional responsible of child care (Ismail & Sulaiman, 2014; Rohaiza, 2014).

However, the number of children could turn out to be positive and significant determinants of female labour force participation. The reason may be the larger number of children could lead to higher financial burden and economic pressure on the family and compel the females to join the labour market (Faridi, Chaudry, & Anwar, 2009).

ii. Child safety matter

In every society, women tend to spend more hours on unpaid work than men do. Strong social norms that see women as being primarily responsible for the home and children, with men as a breadwinner, have made it difficult for women to combine employment with family responsibilities (M.Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2015). Besides, long working hours have been found to be significantly associated with conflict between work and family across countries (Waterhouse, Hill and Hinde, 2017)

For those women who need to work, child care arrangement needs to be done. However, there was a high sense of worry among parents about the safety of children when their children need to be taken care of by other people. In addition to anxiety by their own experience, a concern was raised with the information from other people's experiences that were reported by the media. Then, choosing to stop working was the best thing to do to avoid a greater risk on the safety of their children. Moreover, deciding to give priority to the safety of children means participation of mothers in the labour market as an opportunity cost (Mohd Amin, 2016).

In 2008, it was reported that nearly 1,500 new cases of child abuse with respect to physical, emotional, and sexual had been found. Besides, according to statistics from the Social Welfare Department, 581 child abuse cases have been carried out by caregivers from 2015 to June 2017 (The Sun Daily, 2017). Furthermore, media reports about child safety matter certainly haunt parents to leave their children for their work in the labour market. It is believed that this information is worrying mothers and makes them tend to not work.

Although there is a lot of coverage in the media regarding child safety matter which may influence mother participation in labour market, there is lack of scientific studies have highlighted this issue. Thus, it is suggested that there is a large gap in the literature that has led to a qualitative study to examine the problems that arise.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study conducted by the Malaysian Ministry Of Women, Family, And Community Development as well as United Nation Development Program (Ministry of Women and Family Development Malaysia, 2014), 66.9 percent of married women did not work because they had to look after children. Thus, the qualitative research methods were implement as the research focused on discovering and understanding the experiences, perspectives, and thoughts of the participants (Harwell, 2011). It was observed that there is lack of studies in Malaysia that focused on educated married women. In addition, to what extent issues of child care affected women's decision to work also had not been highlighted.

Those who have completed their tertiary education are categorized as educated people (Mohanani, 2013). As it had been indicated that women have an extra role in the household, the scope of the study focused on educated married women in Malaysia. The reason behind the focus is because they had invested more in human capital compared to those with lower education background. It is significant because woman with higher education can earn relatively higher income and greater productivity, compared to those without undergone themselves in tertiary education (McConnell, Brue, & Macpherson, 2010). However,

With the aim to discover the real problems faced by educated mother in relation to child care safety matter, this research involved two processes of the data collection. The first part was interview sessions with educated married women who were likely to face problems of child care arrangement, while the second part was interviews with experts in the field.

As many study found that variable "children aged less than six years old" had been significant with educated married women's participation in labour force, the interview was focused only to those who met these characteristics. Thus, the use of convenience sampling had been the most appropriate. This research has set at least six educated mothers who were employed and unemployed based on location of residential location (rural, sub-urban and urban) to be interviewed to obtain saturation of data. Selection of the experts in the field were also interviewed, is to verify the findings was made from the informants.

For both categories of interview, semi-structured interviews were employed because they suited the research that needed further in-depth investigation on child care arrangement. Using this approach, Hancock & Algozzine (2006) highlighted that the researchers asked predetermined, but flexibly worded questions, the answers to which provided tentative answers to the researcher's questions. In addition to posing predetermined questions, the researcher employed semi-structured interview to ask follow-up questions designed to probe more deeply issues of interest to the informants.

An ethical approval for the interview session was obtained before the study commenced. Open-ended questions are asked so that the informants and experts in the fields can share their experiences and information. All responses obtained from the interviewees were analysed via content analysis to identify the extent of issues related to child safety matter that influenced educated married women with children from continuing or to remain in the labour force.

As this study selected respondents from the Tracer Study in 2009, the background of the respondents had been equivalent to the respondents chosen by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. In the beginning, the respondents were separated according to ethnic and age groups, as practiced by the DOSM. However, as the number of respondents from other ethnicities (Chinese and Indian), as well as other age groups (such as 16-24 years old, and 35-44 years old), had been a few and the parameter estimates generated high value of standard error, it was combined with "other ethnic" and "other age". This situation led to a comparison between the reference group with other ethnic groups and other age ranges, cannot be done.

By way of this study places the need for a family with at least three children, it is quite difficult to find a respondent from all races in Malaysia, who fulfill the requirements. Hence, all respondent of this study is among Malay-educated women. It's become limitation to this study because there may be some different experiences among those of different customs and cultures.

FINDING

Nine educated mothers with children were interviewed in the first stage while three experts were interviewed in the second stage. Of the nine educated married women with children, five of them were working on a full time basis, while the other four were unemployed. All those women were aged between 34 and 44 years and lived in several states in Malaysia. Five of the nine informants had three children, two had four children, and the remaining one informant had seven children.

The three individuals who were interviewed for the data triangulation are Deputy Under Secretary, Policy Branch (Of Women And Family), Ministry Of Women, Family, And Community (abbreviation = EiF_1), Principal Assistant Secretary, (Family Development Unit, handled child care and flexible working arrangement), Ministry of Women, Family And Community (abbreviation = EiF_2) and Associate Professor in the Department of Gender Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya, who was also a consultant to several studies conducted by UNDP (abbreviation = EiF_3).

First phase: mother with children. Mrs. W/R/1 chose to have her children cared for by her families due to higher confidence for the safety of her children. According to Mrs. NW/U/2, she had never sent her children to child care centres, which are not formal. Mrs. W/U/3 found her son also began getting sick because of an unhealthy practice and environment in the nursery. Mrs. W/R/4 imagined a situation which concerned about the safety of their children during interview as *"I do not believe for someone else to take care of my child .. worried.. many thing happen nowadays as what media reported."*

Mrs. W/SU/5 faced the challenge of cleanliness that affected his son's health in the babysitter's house. Due to high fever, her son got convulsion. With regret, Mrs. W/SU/5 expressed; *"For 10 days my son was treated in the hospital. Since that.. we stopped sending my child to a babysitter"*. In terms of child safety, Mrs. NW/SU/6 also stated that her neighbour who took care of her son loved bringing him out when she went out without her permission. She stated; *"It makes me feel my son is unsafe.. I fear of accident or kidnap"*.

Mrs. W/SU/7 told that her fourth child was taken care of by a housewife. At first, there was no problem with her because she just cared her son. However, when children that she cared of increased, Mrs. W/SU/7 saw that the babysitter failed to provide good commitment to care for her child. She expressed her situation as; *"I saw my son as neglected by the babysitter"*. NW/U/8 and Mrs. NW/R/9 decide not to work because they choose to manage their own children. Therefore, both of them did not face any bigger challenges related to the safety of their children.

Second phase : Expert in the field. Elaborating on the issue of safety of children in child care, EiF_1 stated that it occurred when parents sent their children to child care centres that were not registered. According to EiF_1, *"accident or negligence often occur because of incorrect ratio between caregivers and children. For registered child care centre.. they have guidelines that must be followed... including trained caregivers. Cases reported in the media... when we investigate.. happen in child care centres that are not registered"*.

In an extension of knowledge regarding high cost of care when it is a registered childcare centre, parent choose to send their children to a baby sitter or unregistered childcare centre. According EiF_2, the issues of negligence and accidents that occur in child care centres occur because too many babies and children who are cared for within the same time. Unregistered child care centres do not comply with the ratio of caregivers and children. For that reason, EiF_2 warned that parents should always make sure that they send their children to a registered care centre.

For EiD_3, safety issues do not just affect children who are left at the child care centre or baby sitter. She indicated that there are also cases of children abandoned and abused even when being taken care of their parents and family. In term of safety of children in a child care or nursery, EiF_3 stated that, "if we have a quality child care centre .. all aspects will be taken care of. Not only safe place.. even space to move around, well-trained caregivers, interpersonal skills .. all aspects related".

CONCLUSION

The issue of safety of children aged less than six years, not yet in school and who are taken care of by other people, especially when parents work, had been the issue that was successfully uncovered through interviews with the participants for this study. The situation concerned by parents regarding their child's safety was informed by informants when they itemized who took care of their children while they were working (for mothers who worked) and when they were still working (for mothers who did not work when interviewed). It also shelled out when they answered questions about the challenges faced by them in caring for their children.

An important finding from this study was that there was a high sense of worry among parents about the safety of children when their children need to be taken care of by other people (Mohd Amin, 2016). The expensive cost of sending children in registered nursery caused them to send their children to babysitters who were unregistered, including neighbouring houses. This findings had been consistent with those discussed by Wetzels (2005), Kimmel (1998), Connelly (1992), and Rita (1979).

Although not all cases of injury or negligence had arisen from care by those unregistered, at least, a mother can confirm that the registered nurseries are trained and have standard work processes. In that way, worries about the safety of children are reduced and the mother can work in peace. By working, educated women can increase their income and standard of living of households, contributing to the national economy and putting into practice the knowledge and skills they have learned.

Children's basic safety should not depend on how much money their parents have or where they live. Besides, in the press and reports, the existence of illegal nurseries still exist. Without training and monitoring of qualified institutions, the safety of children in nurseries cannot be guaranteed (Schochet, 2017). Therefore, the federal government needs to make a public investment in child care to ensure that programs are safe and high-quality and to support providers with the resources that they need to practice these critical safety measures (Schochet, 2017). By establishing a more affordable cost of care, parents will send their children to a safe place. When safety matter does not overlook, the educated mother will go to work and then contribute their expertise to the country.

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