CHAPTER 1

Gender Inequalities in the Malaysian Workplace

Abstract This chapter provides the context of this book by critically examining the gender inequalities surrounding women and work in Malaysia. It begins by looking back at the socio-economic transformations that led to the large-scale entry of women into the paid workforce, and the discrimination that waged women faced then and continue to face today. Next, it explores the current barriers that constrain women’s further access to the labour market and decision-making positions, and the policy responses to these. The subsequent section discusses the legislative frameworks around pregnancy discrimination and sexual harassment to further illustrate the prevailing inequalities in the workplace and society at large. Finally, the chapter sets out the aims and scope of the study.

Keywords Women’s labour force participation · Workplace gender equality · Work–family conflict · Women in leadership · Pregnancy discrimination · Sexual harassment

In recent years leading to the publication of this book, Malaysia saw its first woman deputy prime minister, first woman chief justice and second woman governor of the National Bank. Women are now present in almost all professions and at all levels of decision-making and governance. For many, this may seem like a period of promise for the future of gender
equality in the country and, indeed, the gains achieved should not be underestimated. But, as this volume shows, there is still much to be done to provide women with a fair opportunity to participate meaningfully in paid work and advance in their careers. Gender equality is still far from achieved in the Malaysian workplace.

This book shares the broad feminist goal of many language and gender studies, which is to redress the gender inequalities in society that are reflected in, and perpetuated by, language use. More specifically, it examines how professional discourses in women’s media (re)construct, legitimise and contest unequal gender arrangements and relations in Malaysian workplaces. Professional discourses are, in the Foucauldian sense, systems of statements and practices that say something about employed women and their identities, behaviours, dispositions, aspirations, opportunities and choices. As practices that ‘form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, 49), they create possibilities and constraints for who women can be and what is regarded as desirable, normal and acceptable, which may privilege the status quo. Given the interpenetration of public and domestic life, professional discourses include those on family roles that facilitate or limit women’s participation and advancement in the workplace. This study focuses on professional discourses in women’s media—that is, media whose target audience is women—as research has shown that they are important sites for the (re)production of hegemonic gender norms and the regulation of feminine subjectivities, including work subjectivities. In this book, I interrogate the regulatory ideals established by Malaysian women’s media against which employed women are exhorted to measure themselves and contextualise their work-related experiences, relationships and conflicts. These media serve as a useful gateway for identifying the powerful professional discourses circulating within the wider society. As discourses in the media are shaped, in part, by prevailing gender ideologies and broader societal discourses, analysing them can shed light on cultural understandings of women and work that need to be addressed to achieve gender balance in the professional domain.

Given that discourses emerge from particular socio-economic climates and historical conditions, it is necessary to first understand the national context from which the media discourses arise. In this chapter, I explore the gains and gaps in women’s engagement in Malaysia’s formal workforce in the past sixty years. The first section traces the developments leading to women’s large-scale entry into the formal labour market following the years after independence in 1957. It highlights the sexism
that they endured, which, though lessening, still exists today. The second section looks at the reasons behind why despite rapid initial growth, women’s labour force participation rate (LFPR) remains far behind that of men. The chapter then moves on to discuss three important gender inequality issues in Malaysian economic spaces, namely the gender leadership gap, sexual harassment and pregnancy discrimination. Through this, I show how the approaches taken to integrate women into formal economic development have not effectively addressed women’s rights and challenges in the workplace. Lastly, I outline the study’s aims and scope as well as the structure of this book.

It is important to note that the account in this chapter is not a linear narrative of progress since progress cannot be solely measured by women’s entry into the labour market or the rise of an elite cadre of women. Many of the gender- and class-based issues that developed in twentieth-century workplaces still persist today, and I highlight these below. In addition, although women were not always such visible participants in the nation’s labour force and decision-making structures, this does not mean that they did not work. In pre-independence Malaya, many women bridged the public and private spheres at the same time as unpaid family workers who laboured on the family farm, cared for livestock or helped out the family business. However, because paid employment was perceived as a male domain, women wage workers were small in number and largely confined to low-paying occupations (Kaur 2000). Finally, I must stress that while this study strongly focuses on women’s access to and progress within the formal economy, it does not devalue reproductive labour or those who perform it. In this book, I have consciously shunned terms such as ‘non-working mothers’ to avoid constructing domestic labour as ‘non-work’. What I hope is that this research will contribute towards a more equitable future in which women have actual freedom to pursue real choices in terms of how they wish to live their lives and achieve their full potential.

Women’s Mobilisation into the Labour Force

When the country gained independence in 1957, merely a quarter of the wage-earning workforce were women. Since then, women’s LFPR has expanded from 30.8 to 55.8% in early 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020; Ministry of Women and Family Development 2003). The mobilisation of women into the Malaysian workforce was strongly driven
by the nation’s pursuit of export-oriented industrialisation. From the 1970s, the government began establishing industrial estates and free-trade zones for the manufacturing subsidiaries of multinational companies that wanted to flee escalating labour costs at home and relocate their labour-intensive production systems in cheaper developing countries (Kaur 2000; Ong 2010). These foreign-controlled plants were keen to recruit young women, though this was not a purely positive turn of events for women. The global expansion of labour-intensive manufacturing has relied on the exploitation and control of low-waged female labour and it was no different in Malaysia. The firms’ preference for women workers partly stemmed from the idealised caricature of the docile, diligent and nimble-fingered ‘factory girl’ with a natural propensity for monotonous work. This global stereotype was reproduced in Malaysian plants through corporate and state-level practices of control, including restrictive anti-union policies and gender hierarchies that confined many women to low-wage assembly line work and subjected them to intense forms of factory discipline (Elias 2005, 2020).

Another motivating factor for hiring women in the factories was economic. The working class were poorly paid, but the female proletariat, who were doubly oppressed because of their gender and class, represented the lowest cost, with wage levels between 75 to 80% of those of men in comparable occupations (Kaur 2000). Young rural women, in particular, were not only cheap to employ, but also easy to recruit due to ‘their relative oversupply and the eagerness of peasants, village elders, and local institutions to send otherwise non-cash-earning village women to the [free-trade zones]’ (Ong 2010, 153). Falling commodity prices and the progressive loss of farmland owing to agricultural and industrial policies was increasing dispossession of peasants and poverty in rural society. In response, the government rapidly expanded manufacturing industries across the Malaysian Peninsular (Ong 2010). The growth of manufacturing job opportunities induced thousands of young rural women to obtain jobs in the industrial estates (Ng and Chee 1996). Industrialisation in the country, thus, became as much women-led as export-led. In fact, as Ng et al. (2006) point out, Malaysia’s economic success came on the backs of lowly paid women. However, as unskilled workers, these women were the least likely to benefit from the country’s economic growth. Wages in female-dominated industries like clothing and textile were not only lower than those in male-dominated ones, but also suppressed as firms sought out new supplies of cheap labour (Elias 2009; Ministry
of Women and Family Development 2003). In the twenty-first century, Malaysian women in industrial work have been almost fully replaced by migrant women who are in an even weaker position, both socially and economically (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and UNDP 2014; Ng et al. 2006).

The issues emphasised above are certainly not unique to the manufacturing sector or to the past. Women in Malaysia ‘as a whole still occupy the bottom of the employment hierarchy’ and even highly qualified women are taking on clerical jobs (UNDP 2014, 187). The World Economic Forum’s (2012, 2020) Global Gender Gap Reports indicate that not only are men still out-earning women for doing similar work, but the gender pay gap is growing, with Malaysia recording a wage equality score of 0.74 in 2020 compared to 0.82 in 2012 (parity is 1.00). Furthermore, call centre employment has appeared to become the ‘new “hi-tech” form of low-wage feminised employment’, thus challenging the assumption that women’s shift into the knowledge economy in recent decades has led to higher status and higher-paid forms of work (Elias 2011, 540).

Women’s movement into the wage sector was also facilitated by new education policies that provided equal access to education to both sexes, resulting in the higher educational attainment of women, which encouraged more of them to take on paid work (Hing 1984; Kaur 2000). However, the opportunities of women on a whole were constrained by occupational stratification and segmentation by gender, reflected, for instance, in the large numbers of women in stereotypically feminine professions such as teaching and nursing (Ministry of Women and Family Development 2003). Working class women faced additional challenges as a result of their intersecting gender and class membership. Unlike their female counterparts from the higher classes who had more educational opportunities and were better connected, poor women were trapped in limited roles that did not commensurate with their qualifications or aspirations (Hing 1984). The nascent female Malay proletariat in the industrial field, for example, were fairly well-educated and often overqualified for the repetitive semi-skilled manual jobs that offered little opportunity for upward mobility. Patterns of gender segregation and stratification in the occupational structure persist today. In 2017, 45% of women in the labour force had at least higher secondary education and 35.4% had tertiary qualification (in contrast to 47 and 24.6% of men respectively). However, women are still crowded into traditional ‘feminine’ jobs, and their ‘representation at senior-level positions remains low throughout the years.
This is especially evident when even within the field of hospitality and other services—the supposedly “feminine” sector—male managers still outnumbered female substantially (Khazanah Research Institute 2018, 112).

The feminist movement was not directly instrumental in promoting women’s entry into the formal workforce. Nevertheless, politically engaged women had been working towards better working conditions for female employees even before independence, for example, by taking leading roles in strikes to end sexual harassment in the rubber estates and for fair pay in rubber-packing firms (Lai 2003). In the decades following independence, women’s organisations and unions continued to organise for the rights of women workers, such as through a national campaign for equal pay for teachers and nurses in the 1960s. In the 1980s, women who were students in the 1970s both in Malaysia and abroad, and who were influenced by the international feminist movements joined existing women’s organisations or formed new ones (Ng and Chee 1996). These groups have been the main driving force in lobbying for legislative changes in Malaysia to enhance women’s economic and social rights in workplaces.

Despite the immense contribution of women to economic growth, women-specific development policies in the 1970s and 1980s were largely concerned with their domestic roles. This changed in the 1990s when Malaysia’s development policies signalled a transition from a traditional male breadwinner ideal to what Fraser (1994) terms a ‘universal breadwinner model’, where both women and men are engaged in full-time paid work, while care work is redistributed to the state and/or the market (Khazanah Research Institute 2019, 93). Economic growth in the 1980s had boosted female employment not only in the manufacturing sector, but also in service sub-sectors such as wholesale, retail, hotels and restaurants (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and UNDP 2007). As these sectors propelled Malaysia’s economic rise, the state began to take proactive measures to promote women’s continued contribution to these industries, including increasing state and market childcare services (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Ng and Chee 1996). Following the Asian financial crisis of 1997, there has been an increased policy emphasis on transforming the country from a labour-intensive economy to a capital-intensive one to sustain the nation’s competitiveness. This new competitiveness agenda has strived
to enhance (especially middle-class educated) women’s engagement in knowledge-related sectors (Elias 2020).

Despite state attempts at promoting women’s labour market roles, the growth in women’s participation stalled. The rise in the proportion of women in the workforce in the 1980s had been one of the largest in the region (Kaur 2000). However, after peaking at 47.8% in 1990, women’s LFPR stagnated for two decades. In sharp contrast, the male rate was above 80% for most of this period (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2019). By 2010, the female percentage was below the level of women’s workforce participation in most countries at or above Malaysia’s income level and the lowest in East Asia. The gender participation gap was more than twice the estimated average for East Asian and Pacific countries (World Bank 2012).

Women’s LFPR in Malaysia has since increased by ten percentage points, perhaps due to cohort effect and the rising cost of living (Khazanah Research Institute 2018, 2019). As of March 2020, 55.8% of working-age women are employed or seeking employment. Yet, while this figure is comparable with, if not higher than, most advanced economies, it is low when contrasted against the proportion of men in the workforce at 80.8% (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). Additionally, women’s participation appears to be losing momentum again, and their LFPR is projected to increase to just 59.4% in 2023. Despite being more highly educated than men, on average, working-age women form almost 90% of the prime-age population outside the sphere of paid work (Khazanah Research Institute 2018, 2019). It is widely assumed that most of these women have no desire to work, but a nationwide study by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) and UNDP (2014) shows that a majority of women want to pursue a career. What, then, causes women’s low LFPR in Malaysia?

**Why Do so Many Women Stay Outside of the Workforce?**

Drawing on data from the 2010 Malaysia labour force survey, the World Bank (2012) analysed the socio-economic characteristics associated with different levels of participation. They found that low women’s LFPR correlated strongly with low levels of education. Less than half of women with secondary education or below were in the waged sector compared
to 69.5% of women with post-secondary degrees and 86.9% of university graduates. Women with lower education levels often leave their jobs after marriage and many never join the workforce in the first place. This is possibly due to underemployment and low-wage work, which were discussed earlier. MWFCD and UNDP (2014) found that many women with lower education levels are forced to take up informal work because they cannot afford childcare in their lower end occupations. The informal economy allows them to reconcile their domestic responsibilities and their need for income. At the same time, for these women, ‘employment is unstable and of low quality, wages are suppressed, working hours long and irregular, and no long-term social safety net in place’ (UNDP 2014, 198). What this means is that while women with higher qualifications reap the benefits of economic growth, those less qualified are getting left behind. Given that in Malaysia, the gender wage gap is most biased against women at the lower end of earnings where women typically have lower education levels (Khazanah Research Institute 2018; World Bank 2012), tackling the stubborn gender pay gap could increase women’s LFPR, as would making secondary education compulsory. However, as the World Bank report stresses, education alone is insufficient to close the gender participation gap, which remains even at tertiary level. To understand why women’s integration into the labour market remains low, we need to go beyond education.

The World Bank study found that women who were married had the lowest levels of participation. Half of married women aged twenty to fifty-five were in the workforce compared with more than 70% of their single, divorced or separated counterparts. Married women were even less likely to engage in the labour market if they had children. Studies such as those cited below invariably show that care issues are a major contributor for women leaving the workforce. Given that women in Malaysia shoulder a disproportionate amount of care work, this is hardly surprising. According to the 2010 labour force survey, 67.1% of non-wage-earning women stayed out of the workforce because of ‘housework’. In examining this further, MWFCD and UNDP (2014) found that 70.9% of mothers who were previously employed had exited the workforce to care for their children. Even married women without children were affected by the traditional male breadwinner model. Most of them had withdrawn from the labour market because of marriage (54%) or because their husband had asked them to do so (38.8%).
Although women’s economic role has expanded since the World Bank report, gender roles in the family have not evolved as substantially. A 2019 time use study suggests that while men are stepping in to assist in caregiving, family care is still not spread equally between couples. Women continue to carry a greater share of housework and unpaid care despite spending almost the same number of hours as men in paid employment (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). To cope with what Hochschild (1989) calls the ‘double burden’, many women mix various care options, decrease paid working hours and/or join the informal sector, while others leave the workforce. In 2018, 60.2% of women outside the labour force cited family responsibilities as the reason for not participating in wage work, compared to 3.6% of men. Crucially, if the total number of women and men affected by housework were distributed equally between both sexes, we would see gender parity in LFPR (Khazanah Research Institute 2018, 2019). Yet, there has been little systematic effort to promote a fairer distribution of family care work between men and women. One example that illuminates this is paternity leave. Even as other countries are pursuing various approaches to support parents’ co-responsibility, fathers in the Malaysian public sector are entitled to only seven days paternal leave. Worse still, men in private sector jobs do not have a legally mandated paternity leave benefit.

Because women shoulder the major share of caregiving work, their meaningful participation in the workforce is also hindered by a shortage of affordable and accessible quality childcare for babies and young children in Malaysia. Childcare centre charges are too high for many households. Some families in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, spend 15% of their income on childcare alone (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). Further, the centres’ operation hours may not align with parents’ paid working hours. As a result, the majority of households rely on family-based care. In the Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2014 (MPFS-5), 59.2% of respondents cited relatives as their main source of childcare followed by babysitters at 24% (Choong et al. 2018). The World Bank (2012) reports that grandmothers often take up childcare duties. This means that the labour market participation of younger women has come at the expense of older women staying out of the workforce, as reflected by the lower LFPR of women between the ages of forty-six and sixty-five living in Malaysian households with young children.

When asked to identify the forms of support they would like from their employers, 34.2% of women respondents in MPFS-5 wanted more
childcare centres at their workplaces (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). This is one area where the public sector appears to have taken the lead. As of January 2020, 241 childcare centres have been set up in government offices, and MYR30 million (approximately €6.2 million) was allocated in the 2020 National Budget to establish 150 more (Bernama 2020). However, the private sector has not responded as enthusiastically to their employees’ childcare needs, citing health and safety and cost issues (Bunyan 2018). In 2015, only 11% of Malaysian public listed companies provided childcare facilities, while almost half had no plans to implement or improve their family-friendly facilities (TalentCorp and PwC 2015). Cognizant that earlier state measures to increase employer-based childcare have been unsuccessful, the previous government began looking into introducing a ten-year tax break for companies that establish workplace crèches (Bunyan 2018). While such steps are important, we should be mindful that workplace-based childcare is often only available to middle-class women with access to certain jobs. As noted earlier, less formally-educated women are more likely to be in the informal economy without maternity benefits or annual leave while working long and irregular hours for wages that are too low to afford childcare (UNDP 2014). Poorer women often rely on informal sources of childcare. As such, the availability of state-provided childcare is important. As of January 2019, 705 government-based childcare centres have been established across Malaysia to cater to the needs of low-income parents (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). The state, in recent Malaysia Plans, has committed to setting up more.

While recent national policies appear to promote a shift from the male breadwinner model to a universal breadwinner ideal, redistributing childcare to the state and market in itself is insufficient. Without encouraging men to take their fair share of unpaid care or addressing ‘corporate (over)work culture’ (Orgad 2017, 180), women will continue to confront the double burden of spending long hours in paid work on top of being responsible for greater reproductive labour at home. Orgad’s (2017) US study with successful professional women who became stay-at-home mothers illustrates how long-hours intensive work conditions are important factors affecting women’s decision to leave paid employment. The interviewees spoke of how difficult it was to ‘perform[] to high standards in extremely demanding jobs following sleepless nights attending to young children’, especially when ‘[t]he burden of getting up at night to attend to children was rarely shared by their husbands and partners’
A highly competitive work culture also often causes husbands to be absent from the home. Orgad (2019, 63) found that this ‘produces, sustains, and reproduces deep gender inequalities in daily married life, particularly (though not only) in relation to childcare and housework’. While her interviewees had satisfactory childcare arrangements, ‘[t]aking time off to nurse sick children, take them to medical appointments, attend their nursery and school activities, and ferry them to social activities were almost always the woman’s job’. Unfortunately, Malaysian state discourses and policies tend to ignore the realities of home life. Instead, they strongly encourage women to be both an involved parent and productive worker. Such messages and policies, as McRobbie (2009, 80–81) argues, allow the husband ‘to pursue his working life without female complaint, without the requirement that he curbs his working hours so that he can play an equal role in the household’. If we want to see more women in the workforce, we need more holistic approaches that challenge not only deep-rooted notions of ‘normal’ division of family labour but also a work culture that ‘expects and rewards an “ideal worker” who works full-time and overtime, takes little or no time off for childbearing or child rearing’ (Kendall 2007, 128–29).

**Women’s Labyrinthine Paths to Leadership**

There have been concerns that many educated women are leaving the workforce due to inadequate opportunities to progress to senior positions. Thus, to improve women’s access to leadership and drive more women into the knowledge economy, the Ninth Malaysia Plan (for the period 2006–2010) announced a target of 30% women decision-makers in the public sector, which was achieved by 2011 (Elias 2020). In 2010, the government introduced an additional goal for 30% women on corporate boards by the end of 2016 (TalentCorp 2017). Several measures have been put in place to attain this. An important one is the release of the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance 2012 which requires public listed companies to disclose their gender diversity policies and figures in their annual reports (International Labour Organisation 2016). MWFCD also introduced the Women Directors and Advanced Women Directors Programmes, which respectively ‘equips women with technical and soft skills required in the boardroom’ and ‘focuses on leadership, principles, ethics, new risks and strategy’ (The Star 2016). Despite these—and the oft-cited ‘business case’ linking higher female board representation with
improved profitability and corporate governance (Elias 2020)—women held only 11.5% of seats on boards of directors in public listed companies in 2016, which led the government to extend the 30% goal to end 2020 (The Star 2016). As of end 2018, this figure stands at 15.9% (Securities Commission Malaysia 2019).

Women are also underrepresented in the C-suite and senior leadership positions in Malaysia, constituting only 17% of CEOs in 2019, and 28% and 29% of COOs and CFOs respectively in 2020. Female representation in senior management declined from 31 to 23% between 2011 and 2019, before rising to 33% in 202012 (Benjamin 2018; Grant Thornton Malaysia 2019, 2020). This two percentage point nett increase over the past decade is not what we would expect given the (albeit gradual) rise in women’s LFPR. As the pool of women candidates available for consideration grows, shouldn’t women’s visibility in senior positions see a corresponding improvement? Why are women still rare in decision-making roles in Malaysia?

While the notion of the ‘glass ceiling’ is often used to explain the poor representation of women in top positions, I draw on Eagly and Carli’s metaphor of the labyrinth, which was invoked in their seminal book Through the Labyrinth, to discuss women’s circuitous paths to leadership in Malaysia. As Eagly and Carli (2007, 1) observe, the glass ceiling metaphor ‘conveys a rigid, impenetrable barrier, but barriers to women’s advancement are now more permeable’. We all know some women who have successfully found routes to the top, but these paths can be difficult to discover and contain both subtle and obvious obstacles. The labyrinth metaphor, thus, captures ‘the varied challenges confronting women as they travel, often on indirect paths, sometimes through alien territory, on their way to leadership’. Although Eagly and Carli’s work is based on US data, there is convergence in the discriminatory impediments that women in the United States and Malaysia encounter in their labyrinthine paths to positions of authority, suggesting global trends.

One significant obstacle that reduces women’s prospects for advancement through the labyrinth is the unequal division of family labour which creates time pressures for women seeking to advance in their careers (Eagly and Carli 2007). In Malaysia, not only are women still regarded as the principal carer, but such traditional conceptions of women ‘have long been central to state strategies of nation building’ (Elias 2009, 471). Government policies have emphasised the responsibility of mothers in raising productive and morally upstanding citizens. Thus, the
policy shift to integrate educated women more fully into the knowledge economy has generated tensions, fears and resistances within the state and local society around women’s ‘appropriate’ socio-economic roles. Moral panics around issues such as juvenile delinquency, the rise of ‘commuter families’ (in which both parents travel long distances to work) and the reliance on migrant domestic workers as a source of childcare continually re-emerge (Elias 2020). This has fostered and fuelled the scrutiny and policing of mothers and their parenting practices. The Malaysian state, for example, has sought to address the tensions between women’s productive and socially reproductive roles via ‘family strengthening’ policies and programmes. While these communicate a veneer of equality by drawing on the gender-neutral language of shared and equitable parenting, in practice, they reinforce “traditionalist” understandings of gender roles within the family (albeit a traditionalism that is mediated by the realities of women’s increased economic roles outside of the home)” (Elias 2015, 348). As women’s roles continue to be constructed around conflicting discourses that emphasise her productive capacities on one hand and frame her as principally responsible for family care on the other, the burden to balance the demands of both, which is crucial for career advancement, falls unduly on the shoulders of individual women. Surrounded by powerful and consistent messages about their role and duty to be a good mother, women will likely continue to be the ones who interrupt their careers or work part-time, which will slow their career progress (Eagly and Carli 2007).

Women’s greater family care responsibilities are only part of the reason for the gender leadership gap. Eagly and Carli (2007) draws attention to another important factor, sex discrimination. Prejudices against women in Malaysian workplaces can be subtle, but meaningful. They are reflected, for example, in the 19.8% pay gap between female and male managers in Malaysia (Khazanah Research Institute 2018). More broadly in society, they are also apparent in the ‘solution’ offered to the problem of women’s underrepresentation in decision-making positions, namely leadership programmes that patronise and devalue women by assuming that they are not being promoted because of a lack of skills—skills that these programmes will provide. Devoid of gender politics, such programmes ignore the fact that women are not always assessed in the same way as men in the workplace due to gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. Global research has shown that women leaders often face a ‘double bind’, where they are assessed as incompetent if they behave
in a stereotypically feminine manner, or overly aggressive if they interact in a stereotypically masculine way (e.g. Baxter 2010; Baxter and Al A’ali 2016). Such discriminatory stereotypes and gender bias in the workplace can lead to ‘quite a few turns and dead ends in the labyrinth’ (Eagly and Carli 2007, 80).

Answering the questions why women’s labour force participation and representation in senior positions have remained consistently low is a complex undertaking. So far, this chapter has focused on the main barriers to women working and advancing as well as some key institutional and policy responses to them, but it is worth highlighting that there are other policies and initiatives that were not discussed (e.g. flexible working policies and ‘return to work’ programmes). Overall, much of the planning and policy-making appear to emanate from an economic perspective rather than a sense of social justice. Women are largely included in Malaysia’s development plans for their potential economic contributions. This highly instrumentalist approach towards gender and development has not been sufficiently sensitive to ‘the unequal terms upon which many women enter the market economy or the possibility that markets themselves are sites for the perpetuation of gender inequalities’. Rather, it ‘assumes a straightforward link between integrating women into the market economy and women’s empowerment’ (Elias 2011, 530). Government measures are skewed towards facilitating women’s participation by extending financial assistance and improving women’s skills and abilities through what is deemed as relevant training (UNDP 2014). As yet, they have shown little interest in providing robust legislative frameworks that ensure women’s ‘equal access to labour market participation and protection from all forms of direct and indirect discrimination and harassment’ (International Labour Organisation 2016, 59). I illustrate this in the next section by focusing on two specific issues, pregnancy discrimination and sexual harassment at work.

**Pregnancy Discrimination and Sexual Harassment in the Workplace**

While gender discrimination in Malaysia has different causes, they are quite often located in women’s childbearing abilities. A workplace discrimination survey by the Women’s Aid Organisation (WAO) (2016) reveals that 40% of respondents had experienced workplace discrimination because of their pregnancy, the main forms of which include
‘making their positions redundant, denying them promotions, placing them on prolonged probation, demoting them, and terminating their jobs’. A similar proportion of the participants had been asked about their pregnancy status or plans during their interviews, and 20% ‘had their job applications rejected or job offers revoked’ after disclosing their pregnancy. Yet, there are no existing laws against such discriminatory questions. To improve women’s working conditions, the Malaysian Federal Constitution was finally amended in 2001 to prohibit gender discrimination, but the definition of ‘discrimination’ has been left to courts and legislative bodies. At present, there are no gender-specific legislations on discrimination.14

In WAO’s survey, only one in eight women who had lost their jobs or promotions due to pregnancy had made formal complaints. As of 2020, a woman whose job is terminated because she is pregnant could lodge an unfair dismissal complaint (WAO 2016). However, the legal protections provided by the Employment Act are minimal as it does not actually prohibit employers from using pregnancy as a reason for termination. Rather, it

prohibits employers from terminating employees during the period in which they are entitled to maternity leave [and] after her maternity leave if the employee is unable to return to work “as a result of illness certified by a registered medical practitioner to arise out of her pregnancy and confinement”, unless her absence exceeds 90 days after the end of her maternity leave. (Lim 2016)

Employers who violate the law face a fine of MYR10,000 (approximately €2110) (The Star 2017), which is a mere slap on the wrist.

In a 2012 landmark case, the High Court, with reference to Malaysia’s obligation under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), held that the government’s revocation of Noorfadilla binti Ahmad Saikin’s teaching post upon learning that she was pregnant was ‘a form of gender discrimination because [it is a] basic biological fact that only women have the capacity to become pregnant’ (Lim 2016). This decision was challenged by the government, who eventually withdrew their appeal. The Federal Court, on the other hand, narrowly interprets the equality provision in the Constitution as only applicable to employees in the public sector (WAO and the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality [JAG] 2019). In sum,
existing labour laws are not adequate to protect women against pregnancy discrimination,\(^\text{15}\) and this constitutes a significant barrier to women obtaining and maintaining employment.

Like pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment has an exclusionary impact on women by denying them their right to a safe and healthy workplace. Women’s rights groups have been calling for a Sexual Harassment Act for decades, even submitting a proposed bill to the government in 2001. Yet, no stand-alone law has been enacted to address this issue (WAO 2019). The Ministry of Human Affairs issued the non-legally binding 1999 Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, but only a small fraction of employers have adopted this (WAO and JAG 2019). In 2012, the Employment Act was amended to provide for sexual harassment, entitling the victim to lodge a complaint and require the employer to conduct an investigation. However, among other critical shortcomings, employers are still not required to adopt the Code of Practice and can therefore define what constitutes harassment, while the survivor cannot claim damages or even an apology from the perpetrator (World Bank 2012). Further, there are no measures to protect the complainant during the inquiry, and it is not uncommon for them to lose their jobs after lodging the complaint (Ong 2015).

Finding the Employment (Amendment) Act 2012 to be insufficient, the Federal Court introduced the tort of sexual harassment into the Malaysian judicial system in 2016, allowing survivors of sexual harassment to seek legal redress. However, the tort requires the complainant to provide evidence of, and quantify monetarily, the harm that they experienced from the harassment. Such quantification of harm, as WAO and JAG (2019) point out, is not possible in all cases. Going to court also compromises the survivor’s confidentiality. Recognising these problems, the CEDAW Committee recently called for a comprehensive law that would enable complainants to seek redress without going through public, costly, and timely court processes\(^\text{16}\) (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women 2018).

This chapter has so far explored the myriad issues that women in Malaysia face in their occupational lives. Women’s LFPR remains low because they are bound to family obligations, while government measures to improve workplace-based childcare have had limited impact. Policy-making also does not adequately address class-related obstacles and structural inequalities in the home. Further, women continue to encounter
discrimination and harassment that restricts their access to growth opportunities and a healthy work environment. It is against this landscape that the study is conducted.

**The Study**

Working towards gender equality in the workplace requires a concerted effort to disrupt powerful discourses that legitimise unequal arrangements in the labour market and home. We especially need to denaturalise those that are passed off as ‘common sense’ or as ‘good sense’ by influential institutions like the mainstream media. This book contributes to this effort by interrogating the professional discourses that circulate through women’s media, which is a ubiquitous presence in Malaysia. As yet, only a handful of empirical studies have analysed discursive constructions of working women in Malaysian media or investigated the role of media language in reifying gender disparities in Malaysian professional contexts (e.g. Mullany and Yoong 2016; Suppiah et al. 2019; Yoong 2019). Although women’s media routinely present stories on professional women and offer guidance for career advancement, very little research in Malaysia has examined these (e.g. Che Nooryohana 2015; Yang and Nyathi 2019). The present study fills this gap. It examines linguistic representations of women and their occupational lives in Malaysian women’s media, and how these can perpetuate the systemic disadvantages that waged women face. It asks two main questions. First, what are the professional discourses articulated and what subject positions do they make available for employed women? Second, what ideologies do these discourses enact and legitimise?

This book is strongly informed by Rottenberg’s (2018) work on neoliberal feminism, a new strand of feminism that acknowledges continued gender inequalities but transmutes emancipation as individual women’s ability to balance a successful career with a satisfying family life. It also draws on Gill’s (2007) conceptualisation of a postfeminist sensibility that is characterised by the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas and an emphasis on choice, individualism, empowerment, discipline and self-transformation. In this study, I contend that neoliberal feminist and postfeminist logics profoundly structure media representations of career women and their experiences in the labour market. Chapter 2 discusses the core features of both concepts and how they hinder progress towards gender equality and inclusion in the realm of
work. Drawing on research from a variety of disciplines, the chapter explores neoliberal feminism and postfeminism’s influence on how the media (re)defines ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’ ways of being professional women.

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen three media outlets, which are *Her World*, a women’s lifestyle magazine; *Clove*, the women’s pages in a mainstream newspaper; and *Capital FM 88.9*, a commercial radio station targeted at women listeners. Chapter 3 introduces them in more detail. These media genres were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Favaro and Gill (2018, 40) observe, women’s magazines ‘are still an inescapable feature of the cultural landscape of normative femininity’. Despite industry challenges and ongoing critique, they have ‘maintained high levels of popularity across time and space’ and continue to be ‘a key cultural site for the re/production of normative, limited and limiting gender and sexual identities and relations’. Likewise, women’s pages in newspapers play an important role in constructing women, politically, socially and economically. Randhawa (2019), for example, demonstrates how women journalists in Malaysia used their authority over the women’s pages to shape the discourse around domestic violence and provide supportive coverage of the feminist-led campaign for the enactment of the controversial Domestic Violence Act. Lastly, I have included women’s radio, which has received relatively little attention in language and gender research, for its potential as a medium by which women can call attention to patriarchal hegemony (Engstrom 2010). While alternative feminist media are generally not profit-motivated, *Capital FM* is a profit-driven radio station with an explicit feminist agenda. Thus, it presents a rich site for interrogating the professional discourses and work subjectivities produced within a ‘feminist’ media space constrained by ratings and advertisers.

This research focuses on a specific subset of media texts—those that are produced not only for women, but also by women. This is to address the study’s secondary aim, which is to explore the linguistic means through which Malaysian women’s media present themselves as female allies. Because ‘ideological communication may be most effective when recipients do not or hardly expect ideological implications’ (van Dijk 1998, 265), it is important to interrogate language practices that could help the media appear trustworthy, reliable, and even benign. Building upon Talbot’s (1995) work on ‘synthetic sisterhood’, I examine how the
media offers their readers and listeners ‘a close-knit, intimate commu-
nity of women with shared interests and concerns’ (Frith et al. 2010,
477). In Talbot’s (1995) analysis of a teen magazine, she shows how synthe-
sised friendly relationships are established between women writers
and readers through the simulation of friendship and reciprocal discourse.
Since Talbot’s study, other researchers have explored the strategies used
for engaging women audiences in TV shows, lifestyle magazines and
webpages (Frith et al. 2010; Lulu and Sharifah 2019; Swan 2017). This
study extends this body of knowledge by identifying further linguistic
techniques deployed to simulate intimacy with the reader and listener
and potentially make the discourses articulated more palatable. Of course,
we cannot assume that media representations and practices have a direct
impact on how the audience thinks and behaves. To gain a better under-
standing of the ideological effects of the media, we would need to
examine the audience’s response and interpretation of the texts. However,
this is beyond the scope of this study.

To answer the core research questions put forward in this book, I adopt
a framework integrating feminist critical discourse analysis, critical stylis-
tics and feminist conversation analysis to examine the articles and radio
shows. These analytical approaches are discussed in Chapter 3. Although
they have theoretical and methodological differences, and there has been
some disagreement between critical discourse analysis and conversation
analysis in particular, I argue that they can and should be brought
together in this study. Through these approaches, the linguistic analysis
in Chapters 4 and 5 identifies an array of professional discourses that
contribute to ongoing gender inequalities in Malaysia’s economic domain.
Chapter 4 reveals the influence of neoliberal feminism on cultural repre-
sentations of employed mothers in the media, while Chapter 5 shows how
individualistic postfeminist discourses act to downplay sexism towards
women and disavow the need for structural transformation.

Chapter 6 then moves from examining the ideological functions of
media texts to considering their persuasive aspects. It discusses the
linguistic strategies used by Her World, Clove and Capital FM to estab-
lish a ‘synthetic sisterhood’ with the audience and present themselves as
a friend or female confidante even as they promote femininities within
patriarchal and neoliberal systems. Chapter 7 presents a summary of this
study’s key findings, before closing the book with overarching recommen-
dations on how women’s media and institutional policies can transform
discourses surrounding gender, employment and care in order to advance
equality in the workplace. Although I focus on Malaysia, these proposals are relevant to other sociocultural contexts as well.

**Notes**

1. This is the highest political position ever attained by a woman in Malaysia. Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail held this post for 21 months.
2. Women occupied merely 10.1% of managerial, supervisory and professional positions in the manufacturing sector in 1978 and only 22.5% in 1998 (Ministry of Women and Family Development 2003).
3. This prediction was made prior to the Covid-19 outbreak and may be revised.
4. The options provided in the survey were ‘schooling’, ‘housework’, ‘going for further studies’, ‘disabled’, ‘not interested’, ‘retired’ and ‘other’. Hence, ‘housework’ covers a spectrum of domestic activities. These options are problematic as they frame women who are outside the workforce as non-workers, concealing their economic contributions through informal and reproductive labour.
5. The three care options available for Malaysians are care migration (i.e. hiring foreign domestic workers), formal institutional care (e.g. registered public, private and community-based care services) and family-based care (e.g. care provided by relatives and nannies) (Choong et al. 2018).
6. Data from 2010 to 2018 shows that women aged thirty to thirty-nine work fewer hours than men (Khazanah Research Institute 2019).
7. One-third of the increase in women’s LPFR between 2010 and 2016 ‘is explained by the rise in own account workers, compared to only 2.6% for men’ (ibid., 14).
8. In 2019, the Ministry of Human Resources proposed to amend the Employment Act to provide for three days of paternity leave in the private sector. Following a petition pushing for seven days of paternity leave, the then Human Resources Minister committed to propose this to Cabinet for deliberation. Provisions on paternity leave were expected to be tabled in Parliament in 2020 (Women’s Aid Organisation 2020). This is now uncertain with the change in government in February 2020.
9. Elderly care and care for persons with disabilities are also crucial issues, but this chapter focuses on childcare challenges as this is an important topic in the media data examined in Chapters 4 and 5.
10. As of January 2019, there are 4887 registered childcare centres which can accommodate 5.2% of the 2.6 million children aged four years and below, but only 1.2% of children are enrolled in these centres. More data is needed to fully understand the reasons for parents’ childcare decisions (Khazanah Research Institute 2019).
11. The government releases a Malaysia Plan every five years outlining the main policy directions for the next five years.

12. The 33% figure is above the global average of 29%. Reasons for the sharp increase within a year were not reported. However, according to Grant Thornton Malaysia (2020), ‘60% of Malaysian businesses are actively working on removing barriers to gender parity at senior levels’. Actions being taken include ensuring equal access to developmental work opportunities, providing mentoring and flexible working as well as setting targets/quotas for gender balance at leadership levels.

13. Some middle-income families in Malaysia hire female domestic workers from neighbouring countries to take on household and childcare responsibilities. It is estimated that 2% of households hired foreign domestic workers in 2016, so ‘the care migration sector remains small and accessible only to a small segment of the Malaysian households’. In fact, the number of foreign domestic workers has declined at the same time that women’s LFPR has been increasing, partly due to the high costs (Choong et al. 2018, 7). Nonetheless, the care migration model has compounded fears that wage-earning women will neglect their socially reproductive roles (Elias 2014).

14. The Gender Equality Act was in the process of being drafted by the previous government together with civil society. It would comprehensively protect women from discrimination in the workplace and other sectors (WAO 2020). With the change in government, it is unclear if or when the act will be tabled in Parliament.

15. Anti-discrimination provisions in the Employment Act were slated to be tabled in Parliament in 2020. These would protect job seekers and employees from discrimination on the basis of gender, pregnancy, marital status, et cetera. It is uncertain if this will proceed given the change in government.

16. These issues would have been addressed by the Sexual Harassment Act that was scheduled to be tabled in Parliament in March 2020 (WAO 2020). It is yet unclear if this Act, which was led by the previous MWFCDD, will still be tabled.

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