

## **Gender-sensitive Data Wanting in Economic Policy Decisions**

Women constitute between 32 and 46 per cent of the labour force in individual economies, with 36 per cent of them representing the Malaysian workforce. Globally, the increase in women's overall share of the labour force has been particularly marked in export-oriented sectors, where women comprise as much as three-quarters of the workforce. Indeed, globalisation in the form of transformation of production patterns, accelerated technology innovation and macroeconomic policies, including structural adjustment and privatization, continue to present both opportunities and challenges for women.

While the overall economic position of women has improved over the years through increased access to education, employment and reduction in poverty levels, they, together with the poor, are the most vulnerable to the effects of external shocks in the form of commodity price collapse and changes in the terms of trade, economic recession, and adjustment policies adopted in response to these changes. This vulnerability may be due to their overwhelming representation in the policy area concerned, or where they play a critical producer, consumer or reproductive role.

In Malaysia, however, in spite of the importance of these effects, there was a surprising lack of concern for women issues in economic policy-making in Malaysia, although the overall level of rhetoric and apparent activity had been high. Much of the economic policy had almost always been concerned with distributional issues along ethnic lines and socio-economic groups, rather than on gender-specific terms.

There is no clearer evidence of this other than the dearth of data on women in official statistical production and analysis. Most of the data like those pertaining to economic activities and ownership of business enterprises are not differentiated by sex. This is especially acute in areas pertaining to female involvement in the development process, female participation in the business sector, political arena and the informal sector. Without this basic data, it is not surprising that time-series data sensitive enough to pick out the real impact of structural adjustments in the economy on women are hard to find. Such longitudinal data must cover a long enough period to

be meaningfully analysed, thus separating the effects of structural adjustment policies from development change.

Where the data are sex-specific, a host of other problems emerge. The classifications of the groups may be too general to make the analysis meaningful. For example, some of the occupational categories are so broad that even though they are sex differentiated, only limited analysis can be done. Where time series data have been available, they are often of too short a period to meaningfully indicate a trend. Also, in the use of time series data, a recurrent problem has been the changing of classifications, making comparisons extremely difficult, if not totally inappropriate.

Clearly, there is a need for gender-specific data to be collected, compiled and analysed more assiduously by the statistical authorities. One crucial area is women in poverty groups. While data concerning women among the poor are not available, it is safe to infer, since poverty is mainly a household phenomenon, that women will be well represented amongst the poverty groups. Poverty, though vastly improved, is still a problem, affecting some 5.7 per cent of total households in Malaysia in 2004. Women among the rural poor are usually adversely affected by falling commodity prices, and along with those in urban areas, doubly from cutbacks in government expenditure and transfers such as expenditure subsidies and income maintenance schemes.

Special attention should also be given to those women in the factories. In particular, issues of labour education, women in the union movement and the problem of marginalisation of women workers on the shop floor as a result of technology conversion, adds a new dimension of discrimination against women in the labour market. There is a tendency for sex selectivity which biases against the increased participation of women in training schemes which aggravates the labour-shedding practices due to technology upgrading, as well as the possible displacement due to office automation, that is already apparent in some firms and industries. It is, therefore, crucial that labour unions and women's groups be galvanised into an effective lobby for incorporating more gender-sensitive policies and programmes to

resolve women's problems in training and retraining schemes as well as in wage compensation and benefits.

Women are often strongly represented as agricultural and home-based workers. The direct impact of agricultural modernisation programmes on the position of women in agriculture is obvious. Rural development programmes should continue to stress expanding opportunities for increasing the sources of off-farm incomes through rural small-scale industry. The promotion of income-generating activities is a priority question in the longer-term adjustment programmes and policies of the government. A community-oriented approach would also complement the policy adjustments needed to cater to the needs of this segment of female labour. The fuller utilisation of female labour time will enhance family incomes. Dual income families are the norm, rather than an exception, these days.

Clearly, the government's commitment to longer-term economic restructuring will likely continue to effect different segments of the female population in Malaysia. Hence, there is a need to insist on continued and greater sensitivity to the potential consequences economic policies may have on women in this country. Increased women's participation at the decision-making level is certainly essential to the empowerment of women today.

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