Malaysia and Its Transition Process Towards More Gender Equality at the Labor Market: Result from A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

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The promotion of labor market opportunities for females in Malaysia has been part of several quantitative studies. Although the empirical data stresses the existence of gender-related constraints females are facing when trying to access labor market, the reasons remain mainly unexplored. Thus, this qualitative study tried to identify major constraints and challenges females are facing when entering the Malaysian labor market. Focus group discussions with different groups of females aged 16 to 50 have been conducted, as well as with employers and HR Managers of global players. The study identifies local disparities between rural and urban living as major consequences for female labor market access and the achievable employment situation. The analysis of the focus groups also highlights that two groups of women – females living in _Projek Perumahan Rakyat_ (PPR) or "People´s Housing Project" areas and Single Mothers – are strongly affected from often being no constant part of labor market but trapped in side-jobs or non-satisfying microbusinesses. The solidification of social inequality by an absence of support structures and empowerment programs can be seen as the most important reason. Policy recommendations, based on the empirical results, are therefore discussed in order to stimulate a discussion on gender equality.

Keywords: gender inequality, gender and labor market, reconciliation of work and family, labor market re-entries, qualitative social research
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Introduction

Analyzing the possibilities women are facing towards labor market access does not simply mean to understand the labor market structures of a country. Instead, the existing labor market structures are only one corner stone that has to be kept in mind. Gender Equality is moreover characterized by the existing social norms and structures, cultural attitudes and religious patterns of a country. Malaysia is rich of all of them.

The empirical results – not only of this but also of other studies – show, that the Malaysian society must be described as a society in transition (International Monetary Fund, 2018). Neither could Malaysia be characterized as an industrialized or even postmodern society nor does it fit into the characteristics of developing countries. On the one hand, Malaysia shows patterns of industrialized countries like a more and more urban labor market, a huge development of the third sector and also an increasing number of women gaining higher education and participating in the labor market (International Monetary Fund, 2018: 3). On the other hand, the economic growth is more moderate compared to previous years and reforms are needed, to ensure a sustainable and inclusive growth

(World Bank 2018). Also not all people in Malaysia do benefit from the current economic development. Compared to men, women in general do not have the same possibilities to develop a life characterized by stable and formal employment. In addition, women can´t be defined as a homogenous group but there are females, that do face more difficulties to participate in the economic development than others. Putting emphasis on gender issues seems also be worth from another perspective: By 2040, the working population of Malaysia will shrink drastically (Chłoń-Domińczak, 2017). At the same time the life expectancy of both – men and women – has increased during the last decades (World Bank, 2020). Therefore, young females need to be included in the labor market. The growing group of elder people can be explained through better living-conditions, good nutrition as well as a developed health-care-system. Nevertheless, especially elder women will fear poverty and a so-called gender pension-gap because they are less integrated into labor market, do have higher drop-out rates and are more often informally employed than men (World Bank, 2019). The situation is getting worse, when looking at the not well-developed pension system which covers only few people and nearly no women aged 50 and above (Tolos et al., 2014). This means that deprivation among older persons might increase within the next decades and it will especially hurt females. Therefore, changes in the field of labor market and social policy are highly recommended.

Whereas quantitative studies are most important to identify the measurable gender differences in countries like Malaysia (World Bank, 2013; Heyne, 2017), the reasons for the different developments of gender related labor market access remain mostly hidden. To contribute to filling this knowledge gap, the study uses methods of qualitative social science research (mainly focus group discussions but also key informant interviews and biographic interviews) to analyze the mechanisms underlying gender disparities in the Malaysian society with special emphasis on labor market issues and the reconciliation of work and family. The study addresses three interrelated questions: (i) What gender disparities can be identified or confirmed through qualitative research? (ii) What are the reasons underlying the gender disparities? (iii) What could the government do to improve the labor market access for women?

Theoretical background

In order to understand the meaning of societies in transition, it is insufficient to purely name the new developments and contrast them with traditional ways of life a country has established during the last centuries. As Pye has already documented in 1965, studies that analyze societies in transition have to be aware that *"the new states are not just momentarily in mid-passage between the states of "traditional" and "modern", but rather that they represent a special class of societies, unique unto themselves "*(Pye, 1965: 489). Therefore, the main challenge of this study was to identify this unique status of Malaysia and to develop strategies that are specially customized. The Malaysian society is rich of discrepancies: on the one hand, you can find many people developing modern lifestyles, often influenced by social media and the comparison to western countries. On the other hand, Malaysia is deeply influenced by religious aspects and socio-cultural norms. Not only the Islam as the main religion plays an important role but also - more intrinsically than in other countries – the caste system brought by some Indian migrants (Mearns, 1987) as well as central aspects of Chinese culture. While life courses in all countries are influenced by central norms and values and often by religious aspects, it is to ask to what extend religion or culture influence people´s perceptions in evolving societies (Heyne, 2017). Although there do exist different concepts of cultures (for a sociological review see Pfau-Effinger, 2000) all have in common that they stress the interrelation between cultural patterns, religion and labor market access of women (Heyne, 2017: 9f). This means that although many countries, including Malaysia, can look back at an educational expansion within the last years that also includes the female population, the labor force participation of women is not as stable as those of men. As a result, structural improvements do have a limited explanatory power. Where culture and religion are disregarded, the data analysis can´t be done properly. There can be found structural as well as institutional and cultural explanations of the varying labor market participations all over the world. The *structural explanations* stress that the labor market involvement of women is a result of better educational possibilities and decreasing fertility rates as well as new technologies in modern societies (Heyne, 2017: 20). Opponents of this structural approach criticize that there are countries in Africa and the Middle East that have no higher labor market participation rates of women although these are much

better educated than in previous decades. The *institutional approach* tries to fill this gap by arguing that developed countries provide institutional help (such as childcare solutions, maternal or even parental leave and employment protection for mothers) to enable women to reconcile family and work (Schwarz, 2012). The central critic here is that these institutions are only well developed in western (mostly within Europe) countries but that there are a large number of countries, especially in Asia and the Middle East who do not provide a welfare system to mothers. The *cultural approach* highlights the institutional achievements but judges them as to inflexible and dogmatic. Pfau-Effinger (2000) has developed a theoretical framework that includes central gender theories as well as cultural norms and attitudes. In addition, another appropriate way and theoretical frame that has been used for this study – in order to understand the recent status of the Malaysian society – is the concept of Figurational Sociology. Figuration, a word created by sociologist Norbert Elias (1971), means the interdependence between human behavior, historical and social development, religious and cultural influence as well as the increase of bureaucratic organization. In this sense, the concept of figuration wants to combine the perspective of sociological micro- and macrolevel in order to get a deeper insight into civilizing or decivilizing processes. For a gender analysis in Malaysia this is especially important, as the capitalist and mostly western oriented changes are touching the Islamic religion and its traditional female role-models. The woman as head of the household and her responsibility for care issues is a fixed component Islamic tradition (Oxford Islamic Studies Online). This leads to special working strategies of females. Norbert Elias (1971; 1976) developed his concept of figuration by reconstructing social processes that lead to transition. States, transforming into capitalist societies are dominated by struggles for power between developing and non-developing parts of society. By using and widening the concept of figuration, the societies in transition do yield a new middle and upper class that has a special social consciousness, whereas the lower classes remain to the traditional lifestyles, norms and values. These contrary developments mean different implications for the female labor market access in Malaysia.

Methods

The focus of this research was to explore and understand the challenges women from different social groups are facing in order to get a stable labor market access. In combination with a quantitative part, the qualitative focus groups should provide a deeper insight into the life courses and labor market experiences of women in Malaysia.[1] The qualitative research consisted of two parts: first, explorative key informant interviews with experts from NGO´s as well as from governmental organizations had been done to gather information about women´s access to labor market in Malaysia. This made it possible to understand recent labor market strategies better. Also, biographic interviews with women from different social and ethnic contexts were held. These biographic interviews provided enough room to get closer insights into female life-courses and the meaning of work. This explorative, qualitative material was used to create a sampling strategy as well as individual compendia for each focus group discussions. Because of the small samples involved in qualitative research, it was important to take into account the fact that it is not possible to define just one group of females but to consider their social status, educational background, ethnicity and also local disparities. It is often criticized that qualitative research – in difference to the exact and mathematically inspired sampling of quantitative social research –offers no sampling concepts. In fact, there do exist different sampling strategies, referring to the research aim and the research paradigm. In general, they can be divided in inductive and deductive strategies. The well-known Grounded Theory with its theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1976) can be defined as an inductive strategy which aims to reconstruct typical cases by identifying contrasting and common issues in individual experiences and perceptions. In

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[1] The quantitative research was conducted using recent, nationally representative data for the period from 2010 to 2018 from the Malaysian Labour Force Survey, the Salaries and Wages Survey, and the Informal Sector Survey implemented by the Department of Statistics. International data sources (e.g. from the World Bank's World Development Indicators and ILOSTAT) were also used for country comparisons. The quantitative analysis explored the issue of promoting economic opportunities for women both in terms of greater labor market participation and access to more productive jobs within the context of Malaysia's transition into a developed nation and the challenges that are expected to be brought about to the nature of work by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) and other mega-trends.

opposite, the so-called categorized sampling that was used for this study is a deductive one. As a clear advantage it is more structured and therefore compatible with quantitative research results. It belongs to the deductive strategies, which means that central sampling criteria had been defined before doing the fieldwork. The main focus was led on existing ways for females to gain higher education, the transition of female graduates into labor market, reconciliation of family care and work as well as the kind of work to be performed and working experiences females of different branches make. By taking into account that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, enough room was provided to have a closer look at the perceptions of the three major ethnicities Malay (Bumiputra), Indian and Chinese. Local disparities were included by identifying different rural and urban areas with specific labor market developments. A closer look was given to special vulnerable female groups like Single Mothers and women living in PPR areas. From previously done research the concept of contrast groups was also involved into the sampling strategy (Schmillen/Weimann-Sandig, 2017). This means that not only focus groups with female participants were held, but also few male focus groups discussions. To summarize, 23 focus groups with different characteristics were conducted. The complex research method of focus group discussions has already been published by Schmillen and Weimann-Sandig in 2018. In difference to interview strategies, group discussions want to identify collective behaviors and thinkings of similar social layers or even social milieus. Thus, it is necessary to work with native interviewers or moderators who do have a good understanding of social developments in their countries and also background knowledge of key issues as well as appropriate native language skills.

Also, it was important for the research process to design individual compendia for each focus group in order to explore their perceptions of society and labor market development. Nevertheless all compendia were characterized by a central assumption: labor market access is directly linked to other social systems. Referring to Luhmann (1987) society must be seen as a system consisting of different subsystems, some of them more developed than others and some more independent from each other. From the perspective of social inequality research one can say that the system labor market depends on the educational system as well as the economic system. All three systems are operating with special media: the economic system is characterized by money, the educational system is characterized by performance rankings, while the labor market is characterized by the value of jobs which is defined by money and by performance. Many people do forget that labor market as a system is also related to the family system, which provides socialization in order to create socially accepted individuals. Therefore, the compendia for the different focus groups included not only discussions about labor market access or working conditions but also on social inequality and the reconciliation of work and family. Nevertheless, some key topics remained the same in all focus groups, especially those on gender inequality at the labor market. The analysis of the focus groups put emphasis on the organization of the discourses as well as on the content analysis (Bohnsack 2007). In contrast to simple content analysis, the hermeneutic approach also plays an important role. It is to ask, whether the participants developed their own topics and how they organized their discussions by using different linguistic expressions as well as non-verbal communication. While in a first step all focus groups were individually categorized and analyzed by the help of the qualitative software MAXQDA, the second step consisted of a comparative analysis. This allowed to identify key topics and collective perceptions (Weimann-Sandig, 2014; Schmillen/Weimann-Sandig, 2018).

Results

The focus group discussions provided rich insights into the labor market strategies of different female groups in Malaysia. Also the comparative analysis of male labor market access and career wishes made it possible to identify gender discrepancies and to highlight the challenges and problems women are facing with regard to a decent and sustainable labor market involvement. The results will be presented according to the first two research questions while the policy suggestions will be explained as a conclusion.

What gender disparities could be identified or confirmed through qualitative research?

In general, there could be found several gender disparities connected to the educational background and age of women, the ethnic origin of females living in Malaysia as well as their social status. A detailed reflection will be presented in the following. According to the theoretical approach of figurational theory, the results proof the high meaning of work and living in a meritocratic society for both – men and women in Malaysia. The young generation defines itself as dedicated to get good jobs and career perspectives. Independently from age and social status, nearly everybody describes him- or herself as working in Malaysia. This is challenging, because on the other hand in this context unemployment is a term that is very unusual and negatively connoted for many people in Malaysia and those who aren´t able to be constantly employed. The central research question of existing gender inequality at the labor market is therefore a necessary one as paid work plays a major role to create income and guarantees the independence of individuals, which helps especially females to emancipate themselves. On the other hand unpaid care work, mostly done by females all over the world, narrows the labor market expectation of women.

According to previous research results on the impact of higher education on existing gender stereotypes, the results of this study also underline that the attitudes towards more gender equality are particularly virulent within the group of young university students. Here males as well as females describe perceptions of real gender equality with regard to labor market access in combination with increased needs towards the reconciliation of work and family. Although religion still plays an important role for young people, especially the Muslim focus group participants, a modern way of life, focusing on equal career possibilities and care duties for both partners is favored. Also, emphasis is placed on the idea of single-marriage because of real love and passion in controversy to the traditional Muslim polygamie which often occurs from an economic point of view. In fact, the "pure relationship" (Giddens, 1992) is a phenomenon of modern, industrialized countries where higher education influences the rise of postmaterialistic and individualized norms and values and shapens the way how couples want to live together. Higher educated young women express a high willingness to constantly take part in the labor market but at the same time claim the need for a modern family policy that is directly linked to labor market policy. Institutional childcare, consisting of well-educated staff and pedagogical concepts, is seen as necessary to help young families. Also, a parental leave instead of the dominant maternal leave is suggested to ensure real gender equality with regard to care work and to reduce the still existing gender stereotypes. While the perceptions of the young generations towards the reconciliation of work and family for both gender mean an important step towards a general social change, the institutional structures at university are partly but not completely gender-balanced. Although most female students in the focus group discussions felt supported by the academic staff and also encouraged to break out of traditional female majors, they feel more obliged to present good study results and to study harder than their male fellow students. Therefore, the justification of higher education seems to be different. The female participants tell that the resources spent into University years instead of directly accessing labor market or getting married are more critically discussed within families with daughters than with sons. This might explain the higher dropout rates of female student as well as their strong dependence on their family's advice when choosing a field of study.

Culture and religion are two indicators that influence gender-related role models, especially the role of females within a society (Schweizer Nationalfonds, 2012). The focus group discussions showed a clear difference between the Muslim the Indian culture on the one side and the Chinese norms and values on the other. The role models of Chinese women living in Malaysia and taking part in the focus groups can be described as generally much more modern than those of comparatively conservative Malay and Indian women. Chinese women show a somewhat higher willingness to build their own businesses, tend to be more highly supported by their families and generally don´t put as much emphasis on the care duties as women from other ethnicities. Many Chinese women also more clearly divide between unpaid care work at home and business and career strategies at the labor market and highlight the importance of getting access to well-paid jobs. In difference, work for a relatively large share of the Malay women and also of the Indian women is characterized by belonging to social classes: a traditional gender-based role-model could be found relatively frequently in the upper-middle class were

female work is dominantly characterized as unpaid volunteer work which of course plays an important role for social development but also economic growth and therefore has to be taken into account. The male breadwinner-model is also most dominant in relatively more conservative and traditional Malay and Indian families. Being unemployed therefore lowers the status of these males within their cultural context. Especially younger males describe this as a challenging because generating a family income is led on their shoulders.

Life in the rural areas of Malaysia is quite different from those in the urban regions. Villages characterize the landscape, live is slower and people live close to each other. While some rural areas concentrate on farming, others benefit from factories or companies who are attracted by lower land prices. While the rural-urban migration had been dominant within the last two decades, a new development can be recognized: A stable number of families leave the urban areas in order to avoid high living costs as well as long travelling times in order to to achieve a higher quality of life (UNESCO, 2017). The intention of the focus groups in the rural areas was to find out about differences males and females are facing towards labor market access and of course also to see what kind of gender inequality is perceived. Also the local disparities can be characterized as major constraints towards a stable labor market access of both men and women in Malaysia. A clear gender difference could be found regarding the rural areas. Here females seem to have better working opportunities than males as they show a higher flexibility to jump into new work fields. Instead, especially low-educated rural males face repeated periods of unemployment. They describe the labor market access as difficult and unstable. Low wages and the competition with work migrants are seen as major threats. For females, life in rural areas seems to provide better possibilities to reconcile work and family because of lacking traffic jams and reduced travelling times from work to home. Also, the neighborhood networks seem to support the complex duties of working women by establishing joint childcare possibilities or babysitter services. A deeper look at the working possibilities and jobs of rural women nevertheless reveals that many of them are not working in their original professions but have to accept lower-qualified and low-paid jobs in different branches. This female flexibility and the willingness to accept lower wages are tolerated because the rural living conditions still ensure a good income situation and many families can rely on a second income.

Digitalization as an instrument of job searching and employment services is discussed all over the world but referring to the results of the focus group discussions; it seems to be an ambivalent topic in Malaysia. While nearly everyone has a cell phone, the use is quite different, especially among females. The less educated groups prefer to use it for communication because they have no idea how to use the extended functions of their cell phones. Therefore, searching for jobs is only done via facebook or in a traditional way (looking for jobs at the supermarkets, using personal networks, looking in front of companies). Also, there is a gap between rural and urban job seekers. Rural people rely much more on personal networks than urban ones do. Nearly no rural women in the focus group has ever used the internet to search for a job while for urban, higher educated women this is the most popular way to find job offers. The younger urban people, women as well as men, are quite familiar with digitalization. Using computer programs is taught at university, also communicating via modern digitalized forms such as skype or web conferences. In order to search for jobs younger people show a structured and proactive attitude: they do register at professional plattforms such as LinkedIn or Xing in order to get job offers regularly or they advertise their own profile.

Beyond these general topics, that could be identified by comparative analysis of focus groups, emphasis was put on identifying those group of females that are suffering from gender inequality and non-successful constant labor market employment that leads to a satisfying income situation. Two must vulnerable groups of females will be presented in the following. Also another major research aim was to highlight the perceptions on higher educated women on labor market access and the reconciliation of work and family. A detailed analysis will also be given in Chaper X.

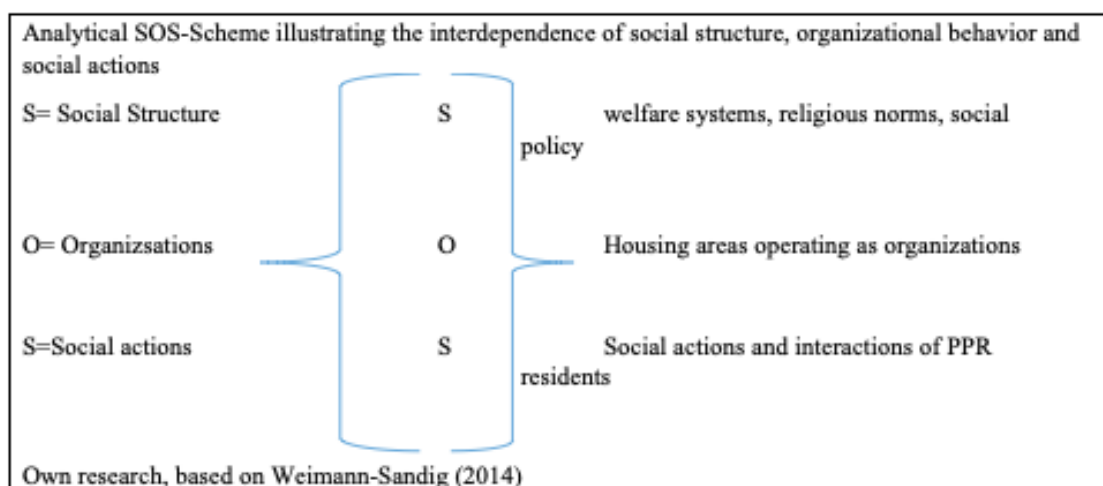### *PPR- Areas as solidification of poverty?*

In general, the "People´s Housing Project" (PPR) aims to provide affordable flats or houses to low-income families. The concept of PPR flats can be understood as subsidized housing, similar to other

countries in the world. Either families can decide to buy a small house or simply to rent an apartment. The People´s Housing Projects are quite attractive in urban areas where the number of low-income family's has been quite high for many years now. In fact, there are more applicants than available flats (Malay Mail March, 2019). This highlights a fundamental change in the spatial dimension of poverty: poverty is rapidly becoming an urban phenomenon, especially in the transition and industrialized countries (Buckley/Klarickal, 2005). Therefore, the idea of housing projects, which has been established and widened since the 1970s all over the world, was a necessary one. PPR residents come from the Bottom 40 and show a solidification of low educational backgrounds and welfare systems as well as a lack of support programs that help women to get access to stable and formal working conditions. Residents living in PPR flats do unite both sides of poverty: the one that is characteristic for developing countries and described by a lack of proper nutrition, especially of small children. The other one is characteristic for industrialized countries, regarding educational poverty and social exclusion. Many women living in PPR flats are single mothers for different reasons. Many of them got divorced, in many cases the husband decided to have a second wife which was not tolerable for the first wife.

> *P1: The cost of living sometimes depends on an individual's financial capability. For example, I have two children and a sick husband. If we plan to buy a house, we have to calculate many times before we make the decision. This is due to the fact that the price of a house is getting expensive. I have to send my kids to schools. I have to pay for petrol. For travelling to and forth sending my kids, paying for the transit place and also the school bus. As I am working, I am not able to do all that. Thus, by staying at PPRT is a good decision. Even though we still need to pay for rent but it is affordable. I am the only one working in my family as my husband is not able to work. Thus, I need to support for everything. So, I think the cost of living is the reason why I choose to stay here with my family. (Focus Group Discussion 20, Women living in PPR areas, Section 90-91)*

While the PPR idea should give the residents protection and social security, the negative aspects should also be discussed: the areas serve as an own microcosmos and therefore can lead to solidification of poverty between different generations. Accordingly, the segregation between different groups is a phenomenon that could be found in PPR areas. Informal work characterized by an instable income situation, non-permanent work and lacking working contracts is dominant for many females living in PPR flats. As many of these women have more than two children, the missing reconciliation of work and family is a major constraint to get into stable employment. Sufficient childcare solutions do not exist within the PPR areas the quality of offered babysitter services there is low and creates a general mistrust of mothers. Instead, many of the women are doing side jobs or informal microbusinesses that can be done from home, characterized by cooking, baking or handcrafting and directly selling these goods. Nevertheless the lacking knowledge of how to find more customers, build up selling networks and advertise products, leads to an irregular income often below the monthly minimum wage. Like in many other countries, the concept of housing areas in Malaysia is not undisputed. Districts, dominated by housing projects, suffer from the low socio-economic status of their inhabitants, what is directly related to the infrastructure. Low-costs shops are dominant, also fast food restaurants. There is often a lack of cultural offers as well as employment possibilities beyond informal work. Also, the quality of schools differs from other districts both in terms of teaching and infrastructure which affects the outcomes and efforts of their pupils.

The empirical results of the focus groups underline the perception of housing areas as own subsystems, creating its own logics, norms, communication and values according to Luhmann´s system theory (Luhmann, 1987). Moreover, PPR areas can be seen as small organizations by sharing all central characteristics: living in PPR areas requires a membership, PPR areas are operating with their own standards and values and they are pursuing a certain purpose. The following SOS-Scheme (Weimann-Sandig, 2014) illustrates the interaction between structures and social actions in PPR Housing areas.

Analytical SOS-Scheme illustrating the interdependence of social structure, organizational behavior and social actions

S= Social Structure   S   welfare systems, religious norms, social policy

O= Organizsations   O   Housing areas operating as organizations

S=Social actions   S   Social actions and interactions of PPR residents

Own research, based on Weimann-Sandig (2014)

Single Mothers: trapped in informal working opportunities

The perceptions towards Single Mothers seem to have changed in the Malaysian society within the last years. The modernization of the country has created a re-thinking of female role models and the awareness for the existence of Single Mothers. This has led to a more emancipated point of view. Divorces are no longer done only by men but also by women, although the social recognition remains different. Nevertheless the younger generation of women in general puts emphasis on changed reasons for marriages: emotions as love and equality lead to a new self-consciousness of women. The concept of romantic love (Giddens, 1992; Beck/Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) is a central criteria of modernizing societies. The changing perceptions towards partnerships lead on the one hand to new aspects of partner selection but on the other to higher divorce rate (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Sharing their husbands with two or three other wives, like previous generations of Islamic women, is no longer tolerable for many in the younger generation of Malay women between 20 and 35. Nevertheless, some females are raised with traditional role models and are still suffering from social exclusion and extended problems of getting into formal employment even if they provide better educational backgrounds. The reasons are seen in the missing flexibility of Single-Mothers with regard to overtime work, shift work, travelling and training on the jobs. Due to their single responsibility for their children and the missing support structures employers still hesitate to employ Single-Mothers as they are characterized as not as reliable than normal mothers or Singles.

> R7: I have a first hand experience madam, when I was about to be absorbed as an instructor, I was asked "Are you married?" There must be something fishy going on, when I was asked that question until I was thinking, "This person wants to employ me or wants to marry me" (participants laugh) (.)So I replied, "Yes I am married"(.)I had to lie because I don't like the way the question was asked. I did not accept the job because I am sure I will not be comfortable. I feel bad because I had to lie, but I don't have a choice. I have to protect myself.
>
> Moderator: But you have been married before, so principally you are not lying
>
> R7:What I meant, when they question about my status, I had to lie to make sure that I am safe.
>
> (Focus Group with Single Mothers 15, Section 494-500)

The central argument of being the only breadwinner within the family seems to be more likely respected in larger and international companies who do provide working policies that are suitable for Single-Mothers such as part-time work, flexible working hours or home office solutions. As many of the companies in Malaysia are not providing a modern work environment, Single-Mothers also belong to a special vulnerable group that struggles to find stable labor market access. Formal employment and

therefore social and health protection systems as well as pension systems and employment insurance would be helpful to this group but do often do not belong to their reality. In order to survive the life of Single Mothers is often characterized by having two or more informal jobs what means that they hardly have time to support the educational success of their children. This is why many of the participants prefer to run their own microbusiness. Those are seen as the best way to combine working and family duties, because working times are more flexible and the work can mostly be done from home or close to it.

> *R9: In my opinion, it is better to work on our own, because we still have children who still go to school, it´s difficult to work 9 to 5 because time is limited, therefore it is better to work on our own. Just like me, I own a business of banana chips and smoked banana, so I am under the supervison of FAMA (Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority) and PELADANG (Board of Farmers Association). So when there are programs for small scale entrepreneurs (small and medium industries), we have to support the programs. So I like to work on my own. (Focus Group Discussion with Single Mothers 15, Section 221-224)*

Transforming microbusiness into real self-employment and running own small business would be the dream of many Single Mothers. The central obstacles are seen in the lacking savings and seed capital as well as in the missing credit rating. Asked about private credits especially many Chinese participants tell about family members who would support them whereas many Malay Single Mothers discuss the missing loyality of their families. Those participants who successfully applied for loans in order to stabilize their microbusiness report that it is very hard to pay them back because of their low profits. Real business solutions that would enable them to achieve growing profits as well as stable incomes appear quite unusual. As most of the Single mothers have to serve as the main breadwinners of their families but also to care for children or even elder relatives, the aspect of social welfare given to this group becomes evident. Noticeable is the missing transparency of welfare possibilities for Single Mothers as many of them have no idea where to apply for money. There seems to be a wide gap between welfare systems provided by the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the information and access in order to get this support. Instead, the social protection of Single Mothers that is provided by the government is characterized as insufficient and also very bureaucratic, not corresponding to the low educational status and also the missing literacy of some Single Mothers.

Higher Education as key to a stable female labor market access?

As the number of females participating in tertiary education has been constantly increasing over the last decades (Tienxhi, 2017), it is worth to have a closer look at the gender aspects of university life and the labor market access of higher educated females in Malaysia. Attending university, especially reaching a Master´s degree or working on a Ph.D thesis is seen as a privilege for males as well as females. Asked about their happiest moments in life, female students stress that taking part in extra-curricular activities or exchange programs increased their self-esteem and encouraged them to believe in their skills and talents. This underlines the positive impact of higher education towards the emancipation of Malaysian women.

> *S9: As for me, I was from matriculation so all I did was study, study...and study. Of course I had high grades but it was tiring. So when I entered university, I joined a lot of programs. This program, that program, cultural program, going overseas and mobility programs. When I joined all the programs my grade dropped a bit because I had little time to study. I could not commit to my studies because I didn't know how to manage my time. But the best moment for me was when I was given the chance to handle a big program which is the "Gempak Variation Carnival" held by my college which is College Ungku Omar. We went to Cyberjaya in order to get funds and when we did get the funds, I thought to myself "Wow I could not believe that I could have done this without the help of my superiors". I was happy because I ventured out of my studying cocoon. I realised when I went out of my cocoon, I met different people and learn a lot of new things. It was fun because I acquired a lot of friends. (Focus Group Discussion with University Students2, Section 133)*

For many female students taking part in the social activities provided by the university is the step into a self-determined life. Nearly all of them experience a world where the influence of their families include all areas of life. This overprotection, most of the female participants describe when talking about their families, leads sometimes to lack of developing social skills as well as creating own career perceptions. Therefore, the social impact of university on the lives of women is highlighted and seen as the greatest achievement. This corresponds with the research results of other studies. The Malaysian Economic Monitor of Dec 2018 stresses that developing human capital does not only refer to general education but also to social skills that are necessary to compete in a globalized world (World Bank, 2018).

When talking about the possibilities to get access to Bachelor or Master-Programs, the young females in the focus groups stress the financial burdens of tertiary education. Especially Master programs are discussed as not achievable for females belonging to the lower- middle class or middle class without getting access to scholarships. This means that only relatively few of young female Malaysians get the chance to go on with their scientific career. When talking about labor market access of higher educated females, the participants stress, that a Bachelor degree is mandatory to get into formal employment and well-paid jobs, adequate to the educational background whereas a Master´s degree provides access to leading positions and an approximately equal chance to compete with male job applicants.

Again, the rural disparities are discussed as a major constraint as the quality of High Schools in rural areas does not necessarily meet the standards for university enrollment. As main reasons lacking financial ressources for teaching materials in rural areas as well as the lower teaching abilities of teachers are stressed. This creates a vicious circle of social inequality as the economic status of many parents in rural areas is much lower than those in urban regions. This means that rural High School students would need highly qualified teachers and best school equipment in order to break out of the circle of poverty. Instead, many of them fail when applying for scholarships. With regard to the decision-making process of parents, the discussants also stress the combination of local disparities with existing gender gaps. The traditional role models, concentrating on the male breadwinner model and care duties of females seems to be still predominant in the rural areas of Malaysia.

Parents as main influencers on career decisions

In contrast to lower qualified females, the impact on parental influence seems to be high within the group of higher qualified women. Here the female participants stress that the decision-making process of parents often lacks of recent labor market developments and knowledge of modern job profiles. Instead, the female students stress that parents often advice traditional professions with high social status that have been well established during the last 50 years (such as medical doctors, teacherss or lawyers), also parents are preferring the public sphere as employment szenario for their daughters as it provides formal working contracts, fixed wages and no overtime-work. In addition, many parents are much more worried about the physical and psychological effects of employment structures on their daughters than on their sons. This might as well explain the different strategies of young female and male academics to jump into labor market. In the focus group discussions, many female students stressed that they would take every formal job opportunity they are offered even it is not well-paid. Part-time work is acceptable for many young female graduates because many of them are planning to start a family one or two years after graduation. Working part-time from the very beginning is seen as an advantage in order to have stable employment perspectives. As employers do not have to reduce working times or search for new staff, part-time is seen as a good way to meet both employees and employers demands. The time-outs of women according to maternal leave and care issues are estimated as a main disadvantage of being a women as still many employers prefer male candidates who do not have to step out when taking childcare times. Many female students claim that especially smaller or middle-sized companies do employ women as long as they are singles but only with limited working contracts.

S9	We must offer more opportunities to married woman.
M	Who?
S9	Married women. Someone said that during intern time to apply for job
M	Continue

S9   Employer won´t choose a woman because they want to get married and have children. We need to have a legal act or something that encourages employers to take married women

(Focus Group Discussion with University Students, Section 940-945)

Female university students in the focus groups are discussing the problems of missing support to reconcile work and family. Although participants want to step back into formal employment after a short period of childcare, only few females are convinced they can manage this. One reason for the need of stable labor market involvement are the high investments (financial investments as well as time for studying or educational investments) that have been done in higher education. Another reason are the rising living costs in the urban areas of Malaysia that can only be covered by double incomes as well as the fear of young educated females to become financially independent from their husbands. Nevertheless, the females undermine certain constraints that prevent them from developing stable work careers. First of all, the dominance of the male-breadwinner model still seems to influence the attitudes of both – employers and husbands. Childcare is still defined as a female task, especially within the first year of life. Therefore, females are those who have to decide between career achievement and care duties. As many females are afraid of being socially stigmatized when concentrating on their career, many employers still focus on development strategies for male employees instead of thinking of new working policies that enable females to reconcile work and family. Care times for fathers as well as mothers or combined care times are suggested as a good way to overcome traditional role models and to ensure gender equality with regard to labor market entries and re-entries. In fact, those modern working policies have often been established only in international enterprises or so-called global players. Therefore it seemed necessary to analyze the perceptions of employers towards female-friendly working policies. The results will be presented in the next chapter.

Looking at modern working policies: No women´s quota but strategies to encourage female careers

Based on focus group discussions with global players from the field of gas and oil industry as well as the financial and consultancy sector, the attitude of employers or HR Managers towards gender equal working policies has been discussed. Accordingly, one interesting topic were gender quotas. Gender quotas have been widely discussed within the last years. Countries like Germany have established a women´s quota for bigger companies because the number of female leadership positions couldn´t be improved for several decades. Since 2016 German law requires a minimum quota for women on companies supervisory boards. At least 30% of boardroom positions have to be filled by women. In fact, the working policies in public listed companies and those with workers councils and trade unions do change. Instead of ignoring the law, leading positions stay vacant for several months in order to find women who are willing to apply for. Supporters associate more gender equal assessments with this. Opponents consider it as negligent to have longer vacancies of top management positions (Handelsblatt, 2018). Other European countries like Norway, Iceland, Finland and Sweden also do have government-mandated quotas. As one of the first American states, California introduced the law on women´s quota in public companies in 2018 (Financial Times, 2018). All in common is a variety of pro´s and cons of laws enforcing women´s quotas as well as of different sanctions for those companies undermining these laws. Because the discussions of women´s quota are of international meaning, HR Managers of the invited global players did critically discuss a women´s quota for leadership positions in Malaysia.

> R8: Sure. I think your company can also share that too right, S.? So, oil and gas is a very male dominating industry. Perceived to be, yeah? So, at this moment we have about at most 30% are women in the workforce, and 15-20% are below 35 years and below. So that's in terms of women leadership, we have yet to reach to the ratio that we aspire to have, but of course that's where we wanted to be. I agree with P., where that we do want it to be about performance, about merit, right, meritocracy and so forth. But however, as this is progressive in nature, we

need to do a certain quota that comes with it. For example, our board of directors have to have a woman compostion.

M   *Oh, do you have that now?*
R8   *Yes, we have.*
M   *About how many percent?*
R8   *About 20%.*

(Focus Group Discussion with Employers of Large, International Companies, Section 139-143)

The general meaning was to avoid a government-mandated quota by establishing active working policies that show Malaysian companies as modern and future-oriented. Nevertheless the discussants confessed that these innovative working policies are fair to little discussed within the group of small or middle-sized national companies. Best practice examples as well as awards given to those employers and companies that develop creative new working policies, taking into account gender-sensitive issues are mentioned as the best way to create a new awareness.

R9: I will go first with a best practice example. At [a large electronics firm] we have a workforce that is about 40% women and 60% men. And sometimes when we hire, we are trying out new gender-equal hiring strategies. So the recruiting teams, take out the names and gender, let's say the interview with the hire manager, so that they, when looking at the CV, they would see the CV as a blind person.

M: Oh! As a blind CV. Oh I see, you mean no gender, no names, only what they do, ok. You do that in [a large electronics firm]?

R9: Yes, we do. We try to do more of it, we are open for new ideas on more gender equality

(Focus Group with Employers of Large, International Companies, Section 123-125)

These discussions correspond with scientific assumptions on women´s quotas. Gleditsch/Ward (2006: 921) stress that especially poorer countries and those who are in transition do compete for international recognition what leads to an increased willingness of global players to place modern working policies without governmental obligations. The need for an increased percentage of women in leadership and top management positions is discussed with regard to the higher education females in Malaysia do perceive within the last years. In fact, 64% of university enrollments were female in 2018 (Unesco Institute for Statistics, 2019). Therefore, global players have to provide new and female-friendly working policies in order to get the best graduates. This corresponds with central assumptions of modernization theory (e.g. Iversen/Rosenbluth, 2010): industrializing countries need the female workforce to develop competitive labor markets and therefore have to take into account the rising female participation in higher education and to implement not only gender sensitive labor market access strategies but moreover to develop career possibilities for women. Destigmatizing female or male-dominated work fields is discussed as another working policy towards more gender equality. Companies that do accept this stigmatizing sharpen gender gaps, companies who do provide strategies in dealing with these strains do encourage more women to step into these fields. Accordingly, the HR Managers describe different opportunities to decrease the meaning of biological gender aspects: physical work can often be done with the help of computerization and robots, travelling can be reduced by implementing virtual conference systems and project work can be more attractive when the possibility for home office is given. This important issue is directly related to the theory of doing gender (West/Fenstermaker, 1995; Gildemester, 2010; Wharton, 2012): although gender differences have long be explained by biological aspects, it is nothing more than a social description and the way how companies are dealing with this biological differencea. Where HR managers do create gender-

equal access and gender-balances working strategies employees will recognize that gender does not determine career paths but their willingness to develop their skills and talents.

> *R9: Yeah that's an interesting way of looking at things. We are males and we are females, that's our given right, we have different attributes, we have different whatever it is. It's different. So, you know, women, we have the rights, as a human being to get what we want and to like what we like. We're always questioning why there are no females as field supervisors. Why are we not questioning why there are no men in nursing for example, there are few males in nursing? Why isn't that a problem and why is it that we look at a woman not being a field supervisor as a sort of a problem? I don't know.*

> *(Focus Group Discussion(Focus Group with Employers of Large, International Companies, Section 612)*

Nevertheless, many participants confess that it is still easier for men to get access to female-dominated work fields than the other way around. Women still seem to have to compete in a different way, they have to proof their "male characteristics" and facing sexual harassment a lot more than men do. This means that HR strategies have to ensure a social environment that makes it easier for women to step in male-dominated fields. Zero tolerance strategies towards sexual harassment are mentioned as well as encouraging women by awarding them prices and publicity for their success. The more it becomes normal to have successful women in all branches and work fields the more it will influence rising numbers of women to apply for these jobs. Compared to scientific results this might be a good way to overcome the still existing "Overcrowding-theory" (Blau et al., 2010: 220f).

For HR Managers, establishing gender-sensitive working policies also means to develop helpful strategies to enable a stable labor market inclusion of females by providing helpful support for the reconciliation of work and family. Nearly all companies in our Sample provide a 2-4 month fully paid maternal leave (compared to the governmentally provided 60 days maternal leave). To support pregnant women some companies do provide health care, nearly all allow women to leave earlier from work when they are in their last trimester. Nevertheless, the time after the maternal leave is seen as the crucial point where many mothers decide to quit their jobs. They want to breastfeed their babies and can´t bear the feeling to leave them to nurseries or relatives at this young period of life. Leaving small children at home when they are ill or feeling uncomfortable is also regarded as an general obstacle for mothers to constantly re-enter the labor market. Some companies provide special family offices where mothers can bring their child with them. Of course, the HR Managers do realize that this solution is only acceptable for white-collar workers while factory workers can´t make use of it. This can be underlined by the findings from the focus group discussions with females: women working in desk jobs generally seem to have better opportunities to reconcile work and family. Following the professional debates on gender equality the participants addressed an important aspect: working policies should be gender sensitive but never exclusive. Following the traditional paths of maternity leave means to determine the roles of mothers and fathers and not to offer free choices. The ILO (2018) stresses the meaning of parental leave as one of the major issues to ensure real gender equality at the labor market. A work-family reconciliation must be possible for both, men and women, and should focus their individual life plans. This means not only parental leave when a child is born but also the possibilities for both parents to decide who should stay at home when children get ill or during school holidays. Some companies give both parents the possibility to work from home during school holidays in order to care for their younger children.

To sum it up, the results of the focus groups with HR Managers and employers from international companies show that those companies are facing the need to design a diverse workforce in order to be competitive at the world market. Nevertheless, a closer look should be made on the perceptions of middle- sized and small companies which often lack of international influence and are characterized by traditional thoughts on role-models of males and females. It is also to ask if modern and gender-sensitive working policies can survive in times of economic decrease and job cuts. Some HR Managers

confessed that females will be more threatened from job losses as the traditional male breadwinner model still exists within all social classes in Malaysia.

Conclusion

Based on the empirical results of the qualitative research it is to ask what strategies could be implemented in order to create a stable labor market access for all females- not matter what social class they belong to or where they come from. A first suggestion would be to critically analyze the existing laws and legal entitlements concerning gender equality in Malaysia. Remaining legal differences between men and women, for example with regard to sector of work should be abolished and support strategies for divorced females (such as job trainings or trainings on the job to re-enter the labor market) established. As it was said before, gender inequality is a social product transferred from one generation to the next if the social structure within societies isn´t changed. This needs not only a bottom up- but a political encouraged top-down process. Existing gender stereotypes for example could be replaced by strengthening the meaning of care work for both- females and males. Implementing parental leave instead of maternal leave could be strong signal towards more gender equality and improve the stable labor market of women a lot. Also the monitoring of gender-specific indicators (such as the share of women on company boards) and the implementation of anti-discrimination policies should be strengthened. A law on guaranteed part-time possibilities of mothers as well as returning back to full-time work within a certain period of time could also be discussed. Other countries like Germany have already embarked this process. Concerning the vulnerable groups of PPR-residents and Single Mothers and also taking into account the severe local disparities, it seems necessary to provide women with the skills they need in order to use digital technologies for productive purposes. One idea could be to set up internet cafes run by social workers in poorer or rural areas, where internet and computer trainings are provided for women. Also, outreach activities should be increased to strengthen special labor market programs for vulnerable groups of women and to provide help in order to get them into stable employment or giving them the chance to create their own microbusiness. Young educated females need to be made more competitive in order to create stable labor market involvement. With regard to university and subject selection, parents could be identified as major influencers. Therefore, establishing career guidance programs for parents in order to inform them about the new labor market dimensions and new jobs emerging from an increasing service orientation as well as digitalization could be change to job selections strategies of young academic females. Last but not least the missing reconciliation of work and family reinforces the need to develop the childcare services in Malaysia. Institutional childcare, based on the pedagogical programs of Early Childhood Education could help to convince females to leave their children to well-trained and educated pedagogical staff. Labor market policy in Malaysia needs to be strongly connected to family policy in order to overcome traditional role models that underline gender inequality. Malaysia has possibilities to improve this situation and to break barriers for females.

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