

Women and Education in Malaysia

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The five Year Malaysia Plans that serve as the blueprint for development in our country emphasise the importance of education for sustained economic growth. It is also recognised that gender equality in access to education is necessary if more women are to contribute towards social and economic development. This article describes the education status of Malaysian women and how this relates to their employment prospects.

Enrolment in Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning

The expansion of educational opportunities since Independence in 1957 and the growing awareness of the need for education to attain a better standard of living have led to increased female enrolment in schools as shown in the Educational Statistics reports of the Ministry of Education. At the primary level the number of female students increased more than three-fold from a total of about 390,000 in 1957 to 1.43 million students in 2001. The female-male ratio in primary school enrolment improved notably from 41:59 in 1957 to 49:51 at the turn of the millennium.

The Government focused on secondary education after achieving satisfactory progress in the area of primary education. Prior to the 1970s, the number of students in secondary schools was low but it grew steadily over time for both gender groups. The number of students increased from 53,974 males and 27,068 females in 1957 to 1,000,296 males and 1,037,262 females in 2001. The percentage of females in secondary school enrolment improved tremendously from 33 percent in 1957 to slightly

over 50 percent since the 1990s.

For tertiary education opportunities were scarce in the early post-independence era. However, after 1970s more universities and colleges were established and today we have numerous institutions of higher education throughout the country. Male students consistently outnumbered female students until 1995 but there was a reversal in this trend after 1995. For instance, the student enrolment in Malaysian universities and colleges comprised 10,791 males and 4,596 females in 1970 as compared to 150,984 males and 185,730 females in 2001 and the female-male student ratio climbed from 30:70 in 1970 to 55:45 in 2001.

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The above figures map the progress made by females at each level of education. There is a marked increase in female enrolment in absolute terms and a convergence in the male and female student enrolment over the years, indicating that Malaysia has achieved gender parity in aggregate

student enrolment at all education levels.

Gender Differences in Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning

Let us now look beyond aggregate enrolment figures for males and females, respectively and unravel prevailing gender differences in secondary and tertiary level courses. Universally, girls lag behind boys in the area of science or technical/vocational subjects. Azizan Baharuddin's (2003) study showed that more than half of the secondary students in Malaysia who qualified for the science stream at the Form 4 level in the 1990s comprised females. However, in 1993 and 1994 only 47 percent of girls who qualified to do science at the Form 4 level chose to do so as compared to 62 percent in the case of males. The lower percentage of girls who opt for science reflects the preference girls have for home economics and commerce. At the Form 6 level about the same percentage of girls and boys take up science but girls in the science stream prefer biology and chemistry while boys generally prefer science subjects such as mathematics and physics that emphasise the application of formulae.

Next, we turn to the situation in technical and vocational schools. The enrolment in these schools has increased in tandem with the growing demand for skilled and trained manpower. The Educational Statistics reports show that the enrolment in technical and vocational schools increased markedly in the past three decades, i.e. the enrolment was 4,924 in 1970, 18,031 in 1980, 30,691 in 1990 and 67,607 in 2001. As the enrolment in technical and vocational schools grew with time, so did the

number of female students but there is a persistent gender gap in student enrolment. The proportion of female students in the total enrolment of technical and vocational schools was 16.2 percent in 1970, 29.4 percent in 1980, 25.1 percent in 1990 and 34.3 percent in 2001. In addition, male and female students tend to specialise in different areas. Aminah Ahmad (1998) and Azizan Baharuddin (2003) have found that female students are concentrated in non-technical or arts-based courses. For instance, in the 1990s female students accounted for over 70 percent of the total enrolment in commerce and no less than 90 percent of the enrolment in home economics. In contrast, female participation in engineering courses has been relatively low, i.e. less than 30 percent in technical schools and about 10 percent in vocational schools.

The Educational Statistics reports reveal that post-secondary education in polytechnics is gaining popularity amongst men and women. The male (female) student enrolment in polytechnics increased from 2,409 (615) in 1980 to 5,813 (1,544) in 1990 and soared to 12,774 (9,961) in 2001. The notable increase in enrolment in recent times may be partly attributable to the increasingly wide range of courses that are offered to cater to the interests of both gender groups as well as to the growing demand for skilled and trained manpower.

Based on the figures above, it is evident that female participation in polytechnics has improved as reflected by the female-male student ratio that increased appreciably from 20:80 in 1980 to 39:61 in 2001. But it is also pertinent to investigate whether there has been any progress in terms of women venturing out of traditional “female” courses and making inroads into male-dominated fields of specialisation. The 2001 Educational Statistics report shows that the proportion of female students was relatively high in courses such as Secretarial Science (96 percent), Apparel and Fashion Design (97 percent), Banking and Finance (84 percent), Book-keeping (78 percent), Business Studies (74 percent), Insurance (73 percent) Hotel and Catering management (73 percent) and Data Processing (69 percent). On the other hand, female representation was relatively low in Architecture (42 percent), Industrial Design (40 percent), Civil Engineering (39 percent), Building Services Engineering (33 percent) and Mechanical Engineering (12 percent). It appears that women still constitute the majority in arts-based courses and males continue to dominate the science and technical courses. However, the gender gap in the male-dominated fields has contracted over the years. For instance, the female-male student ratio in civil engineering increased from 22:78 in 1990 to 39:61 in 2001 whilst in mechanical engineering it increased from 1:99 in 1990 to 12:88 in 2001.

Finally, we turn to the case of tertiary education. Azizan Baharuddin (2003) presents the gender composition in various tertiary level courses in the late 1990s. It was found that women comprised about 60 percent of the total

number of students in arts-based courses that include Humanities, Economics, Business and Law. Females represented about 58 percent of the student population in the sciences that consist of courses like Medicine, Dentistry, Applied Sciences, Pure Sciences and Computer Science. However, females lag behind males in technical courses like engineering, architecture and survey, i.e. females form about 27 percent of the total enrolment in this area of tertiary education. In spite of the general male predominance in engineering, there are signs that more women are now attracted to newer engineering fields. According to Koh (2004), the University of Malaya’s enrolment figures in the current millennium reveal that whilst women still tend to shy away from the traditional forms of engineering such as civil and mechanical engineering, female undergraduates outnumber males by about 50 percent in telecommunication engineering and their numbers are a notch above males in chemical engineering. The trend in Malaysia is similar to that in Singapore where women equal or outnumber men in some engineering courses.

Conclusion

In Malaysia the selection of applicants to schools and institutions of higher learning is based on merit and there is no discrimination against females. Given the absence of educational policies that limit female enrolment in educational institutions, it appears that segregation in education is the result of gender stereotyping that prevails in society. Moreover, females may be more inclined to enrol in traditionally female courses because conformity is a means of gaining social support and avoiding feelings of isolation. However, those who opt for female-dominated courses tend to get lower paid and lower status jobs. Furthermore, as the economy becomes increasingly technological and mechanised, the job opportunities for those without the relevant vocational and technical training, who are mostly women will become increasingly restricted. They will have to compete for what could be a shrinking pool of professional as well as non-professional jobs not requiring technical skills which will become increasingly insecure and poorly paid, and this would consequently perpetuate the gender earnings gap in the economy.

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