Reimagining Women’s Role in Gender-specific Policies

Bok, G.I. a*, Khauthar Ismail. b*

aAnthropology and Sociology Section
School of Distance Education
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: guatim@usm.my

bAnthropology and Sociology Section
School of Distance Education
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: khautharism@usm.my

Abstract

This conceptual paper aims to explore the meaning of gender-specific policies in the context of women’s role in Malaysia. In developing countries such as Malaysia, family targeted policies are often adopted under women’s rights and empowerment within the context of gender equality. On the 10th of June 2018, Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who is also the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, urged that flexible working hours for women in relevant industries should be implemented after further studies. Even though this intention is lauded, explicitly targeting women in gender-specific policies would lead to other dilemmas: are we empowering women or are we reinforcing the role of women as a mother and a wife? More specifically, by creating gender-specific policies, are we regressing women’s role in society and in doing so, will we alienate other family members that also have vital roles in the family institution? As a preliminary research, this paper has combined the reviews of a few selected flexible family-friendly policies (FFP) and its structures in Malaysia and selected Nordic Countries such as Sweden and Norway with a series of literature reviews as the method. The initial finding departs from the traditional mainstream understanding of gender-specific rights and empowerment in the working sector by highlighting both the rights of women and other family members in policies related to the family institution in Malaysia. This paper suggests that it is vital to deliberate the consequences of gender-specific policies prior to creating a family-friendly policy as it often has a negative connotation on women’s role in family and society. In addition, it is recommended that this policy should include all relevant social members who are beneficial for the family. More pertinently, by reimagining the policies that limit the role of women in Malaysia, women can be empowered.

Keywords: empowerment, flexible working arrangement, gender-specific policies, reimagining, women
1. Introduction

In 2014, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) collaborated to study women’s labour force participation in Malaysia. The project revealed that most Malaysian women respondents struggled with work-life balance. This was mainly due to their inclination to perform care work compared to others in the family. In June 2018, Malaysia’s Minister for Women, Family and Community Development, Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, pushed for flexible working hours for women and this is in line with the study to support the work-life balance of working women in Malaysia. Nevertheless, MWFCD and UNDP’s report also emphasised that the government must ensure the stereotyping of women’s role is stopped and responsibilities at home must be shared with their partners. While the push for flexible working hours for women in Malaysia is applauded, we must ask if this policy is implemented, will it help to balance the work-life of working women and more significantly, does it help end the stereotyping of women’s role?

There have been attempts to reconcile the traditional division of labour in countries like Germany. As a conservative welfare state that is dependent on the male breadwinner model, Germany is showing progress in regulating their archetypal division of labour (Olah & Fratczak, 2009). For example, Germany has successfully implemented the Elterngeld programme that supports parents in the early stages of their children’s life. This programme provides financial support for child care so that both parents can achieve work-life balance. According to Botsch (2015), this income replacement scheme encourages fathers to play a more active role in child care and it allows mothers to continue being actively employed. Moreover, Olah and Fratczak (2009) reported that women were re-entering the labour market earlier than before the implementation of the programme. This reveals that focusing on family-friendly policies (FFP) instead of gender-specific policies will allow women to shed their stereotypical role as only a mother and empower them in employment. Furthermore, it also allows men to play a more active role in family care. Therefore, this paper argues that the push for policies focusing on women alone is not sufficient to ease the burden of working Malaysian women and to stop the stereotyping of their role in society. Thus, the objective of this paper is to explore the meaning of gender-specific policies in available FFP in Malaysia and other countries that are related to family care matters.
2. Literature Review

Between 1970 and 2017, the female labour force participation rate in Malaysia increased from 36%\(^2\) to 55%\(^3\). This was a significant 19% increment compared to the male labour force participation rate that declined from 83% to 81%. The increment was possible due to the industrialisation process in the 1970s. As a leading producer of natural rubber and tin ore in the 1970s, Malaysia was able to kick-start its industrialisation process (see Hirschman & Aghajanian, 1980). Simultaneously, a fundamental change was occurring to Malaysia’s industrialisation policies. Subramaniam and Selvaratnam (2010, pp. 43-44) observed that Malaysia was shifting from being an import-focused industry to an export-oriented industry. The combination of these, along with the need to support their families in the midst of urbanisation and to gain self-autonomy (see Ariffin, 1983; Heng, 1994) have led to an increase in female labour force in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, women face work-home challenges, often more than men, in juggling their time at work and at home (see Aminah, 2005; Hill, Märtinson, Ferris, & Baker, 2004; Marican & Sabil, 2017). In ‘Women at Work’ (2016, p. 66), the International Labor Office (ILO) reported that women who work full time and have larger care responsibilities face issues with their income, career development, and status at retirement. The report further stated that this occurs because women in this position are unable to contribute to extending working hours and often they are the ones that initiate care for their family and little children (see also Subramaniam, Ali, & Overton, 2010). A possible explanation for this comes from Franck’s (2012) research on informal micro-entrepreneurship for women in Penang, Malaysia. In her research, she found that even when women took over the breadwinner role, there was ‘no re-negotiation of the gendered division of labour within the household’ (Franck, 2012, p. 71). In short, women are still expected to fulfil their domestic roles while working in paid employment. The continuation of this normative behaviour further stereotyped their role. According to the ILO report (2016, p. 1), this inclination is the reason women are still experiencing inequality at work.

Realising the inequalities faced by Malaysia’s female workforce such as the discrimination of working females with families and work-home conflicts, the Malaysian Government is adapting to support flexible working arrangement (FWA\(^4\)) and family-friendly system at the workplace. Specifically, the government is offering grants and tax incentives to
encourage organisations to implement parent-friendly work settings and to retain women in employment. Examples are retention grant and double tax deduction for organisations that hire and train women on a career break and provide a childcare centre in the workplace. Based on TalentCorp’s survey (2014), corporations such as Sunway, Maybank, Taylor’s Education Group, and Celcom have taken the initiative to introduce flexible working arrangements such as flexible working hours. Nevertheless, these arrangements were not a policy introduced by the government, which explains the insistence of the Minister for Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia to introduce flexible working hours for women. According to Hill et al. (2004), flexible working hours are imperative as it enables women with young children to balance their time for work and home.

While Malaysia is still in the early stages of seeking resolutions for working women, other countries like Norway, Sweden, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have long advanced and evolved in FFP. For instance, the focus on women’s entitlements in family policies has shifted to the labour market status of women instead of their role as mothers since the early 1970s in Sweden (Lewis & Åström, 1992). Besides that, in Brandth and Kvande’s study (2009), they discovered that the six weeks of parental leave period reserved for fathers in Norway had a positive effect on their participation in child care. These two studies have revealed that FFP does not have to hinge on women’s role as a mother and as a wife and it can include fathers and other carers into the FFP.

Hence, Malaysia should not consider FFP solely based on women’s role as mothers but should also take their labour market status into consideration. In addition, the FFP must consider the role of fathers and other carers in family care. With more fathers being involved in caring for the family, women can be more present at work and thus empowered.

3. Method

This paper works as a conceptual paper to initiate a preliminary investigation into the nature of FFP in Malaysia. As a conceptual paper, it is solely based on literature review that was accomplished in two parts. The first part focused on reviewing the available FFP in Malaysia. This paper chose to focus on one policy in Malaysia, i.e. Circulation Number 5/2014 (Childcare Leave [CL]). This government policy was chosen because it is not only crucial for the public sector as the single largest employer in Malaysia but it, directly and indirectly, influences the private sector as well (see Abdullah & Mansor, 2009). The second part focused
on reviewing the policies and issues of previous researches on FFP, particularly those from countries with established FFP such as Sweden and Norway. This review enabled a preview into the present condition of FFP and to some extent the FWA in Malaysia, whereby its prospects and limitations were examined. The paper faced some restrictions due to its limited research resources and thus urges for future research on FFP in Malaysia to be conducted as promptly as possible. Based on this, the future research on FFP in Malaysia is more likely to be descriptive and explorative. Hence, this paper suggests a quantitative approach with the Likert survey as a primary method to obtain respondents’ perceptions of gender-specific and gender-neutral policies involving all relevant parties in family care.

4. Findings and Analysis

Since Malaysia has no FWA policy, this paper has considered a few government FFP in Malaysia, namely Circulation Number 5/2014 and Circulation Number 11/2017. These policies were chosen because it offers a current view on FFP that are gender-specific. However, for discussion purposes, this paper will only focus on Circulation Number 5/2014.

Circulation Number 5/2014 is the latest and improved version of CL policy for female government employees. This policy was first introduced in the Service Circulation Number 9 in 1991. In the circulation, a female employee who has recently given birth can apply for unpaid leave up to 90 days, once she has completed her 42 days of paid maternity leave. The purpose was to offer an additional period for breastfeeding and care for the newborn baby. This policy ensures a secured job for female government employees who must care for their young children. Although CL differs from Maternity Leave (ML), they both work together.

In 1998, under Circulation Number 2, the number of ML was increased to 60 days. Consequently, the CL became applicable on the 61st day after the ML ends. In Circulation Number 15/2007, the CL was once again considered for the betterment of the family. In this circulation, the government granted up to 1,825 days of unpaid leave (equivalent to 5 years) to female government employees with children under the age of 5. Following this, in line with the Tenth Malaysia Plan to empower women to enhance their economic contribution, the Malaysian government improved the CL policy. Therefore, in circulation Number 5/2014, the CL is no longer bounded to the ML. Female government employees could now split their leave between their children, granted it is within the 5-year limit and only for children aged 5 years old and below. Additionally, this policy is now extended to female government
employees with stepchildren, legally adopted children, and minors under guardian’s care. Furthermore, all these employees will still be considered for promotion during this period. 

Increasing the number of CL was a huge step forward in terms of FFP in Malaysia. Nevertheless, this policy is a double-edged sword. On one end, it permits female employees to take care of their child while simultaneously it secures their job and career since this policy allows them to be considered for promotion if they have fulfilled the requirements by the time they commence their leave. On the other end, the leave, which is only made available to female employees, has forced the care of children and family to be the sole responsibility of women. This inevitably affects their career in the long run (Görlich & De Grip, 2008; K. J. Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Waldfogel, 2001). Besides that, the policy has also conveniently overlooked the father or carer’s role. Even though the Malaysian government’s aim was to empower women in economic contribution, this gender-specific policy has considerably regressed that intention, since it was created based on women’s role as a mother and a wife and not on their labour market status. On a deeper level, this female-as-the-main-family-carer model should not come as a surprise, as Malaysian women are subjected to a patriarchal society (see Subramaniam & Selvaratnam, 2010, p. 46). Rather than empowering women, this gender-specific policy appears to regress women’s role in Malaysian society. This was the underlying problem in the Swedish government’s old FFP.

In the following section, the progress of FFP in Sweden will be briefly discussed. The paper’s intention is not to provide a historical context of the Swedish FFP but instead, it aims to draw out issues pertaining to gender-specific and gender-neutral policies.

Issues in Gender-specific Policies

Together with the rest of the Nordic countries, Sweden is considered a forerunner in designing FFP. One of Sweden’s earliest FFP focused on women’s status as mothers. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, Sweden has already adopted gender-specific policies. In 1900, a maternity law was passed to prohibit women from working for two weeks following childbirth. This law was implemented because women cannot afford to be sick after childbirth because it will affect their roles as mother and wife (Stanfors & Larsson, 2014). Nonetheless, this maternity leave was unpaid and it did not guarantee the women’s job. However, discriminating women for being married and pregnant became unlawful, in 1936 and 1946, respectively. As for paid maternity leave, it only materialised in 1955. Prior to this, paid
maternity leave was based on the agreement between two parties. In the 1940s, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein pushed forward their influential idea for women’s right to be workers but this was heavily accompanied by their role as a mother (Lewis & Åström, 1992, p. 66). According to Stanfors and Larsson (2014), up until the late 1960s, many FFP was centred on women’s childbearing and family responsibilities. The issue with Sweden’s gender-specific FFP was it hindered women’s labour participation and significantly impeded gender equality (K. P. Morgan, 1991). Hence, by the end of the 1960s, the Swedish government strategized to define all adults as workers, thus relieving them from being dependent on the traditional model of division labour.

Issues in Gender-neutral Policies

In the 1970s, the Swedish government introduced flexible working rights for both parents. As part of their parental leave, parents are entitled to moderate their working hours from 8 to 6 hours until the youngest child turns 8. In addition to this, each parent is entitled to 240 days of paid parental leave. To ensure gender equality, 90 days of this leave are kept solely for the father or mother and they are not transferable (see Åkerström, 2018). According to Hegewisch (2009), this played a significant role in increasing the labour force participation of Swedish women.

Nevertheless, Gupta, Smith, and Verner (2008) believe certain ‘boomerang’ effects can emerge from this model of gender-neutral FFP. Similar to the study by Duvander, Ferrarini, and Thalberg (2005), they observed that flexible parental leave is often taken by mothers rather than fathers (see also Nielsen, Simonsen, & Verner, 2002). According to them, this has not only led to the worsening of women’s position in the labour market but also impacted their wages. They added that this negatively influenced the children’s welfare and cognitive development. Even though gender-neutral policies are intended to support gender equality and create a work-life balance, there still seems to be a problem.

Brandth and Kvande (2009) offer an insight into the pros and cons of gender-neutral policies through a comparative study of gender-specific and gender-neutral policies in a Norwegian context. In 1993, the Norwegian government created a 6-week gender-specific parental leave reserved for fathers. Following that, in 1998, the Norwegian government rolled out a gender-neutral cash-for-care scheme. In Brandth and Kvandes’s (2009, pp. 186-187) research, they discovered that while the cash-for-care scheme is meant to promote gender equality, it is
practised as a gendered one because it sits on a gendered social context (see Hagqvist, Nordenmark, Pérez, Trujillo Alemán, & Gillander Gådin, 2017). Nonetheless, through the gender-specific policy, fathers were found to be less stressed and strained to care for their children, while being the minority to do so.

In summary, the review on the development of these policies not only reveal the challenges of gender-specific policies but it also highlights the issues of gender-neutral policies. Gender-specific policies were intended to support women at work and at home. Nevertheless, this has led to gender inequality at work as this model focused on women’s role as a homemaker. To counter this, Nordic countries developed gender-neutral policies with the intention to create gender equality. Even though Sweden focused on women’s labour market status in their FFP as early as in the 1970s, Lewis and Åström (1992) believe this has only changed the position of women. While men are included in the FFP, the gender-neutral policy, more often than not, inevitably forced women to decide their shift at work and at home more than men. Lewis and Åström (1992) noted that the rate of men claiming parental leave ranged between a low 5.5% and 6.5% in the span of 15 years. This raises the question regarding women’s inclination towards family care within gender-neutral policies and even in an assumed gendered-neutral model of division of labour. Interestingly, in a gender-specific policy such as the parental leave reserved for fathers in Norway, the autonomous participation of fathers in childcare is ensured. On the other hand, while Sweden has a 90-day leave reserved for fathers, by placing it under the guise of gender-neutral policy, it has reduced the need to recognise fathers’ role in childcare that remains neglected. Thus, comparatively, it appears Norway has induced more changes in the social norms concerning the archetypal role of fathers through gender-specific policy and this in some ways has reduced the stereotyping of fathers’ role. As such, to reduce the general stereotyping of women and men’s roles and their inclination to self-typecast, FFP could focus on inducing more changes in normative social behaviour.

Malaysia’s CL policy is gender-specific and based on the traditional division of labour model. Families in Malaysia are in dire need of an effective FFP, especially with the steady increment of female labour participation rate in Malaysia. As the government has the ability to influence gender equality (see Orloff, 1996), it is vital that during the early stages of drafting FWA and FFP in Malaysia, the fundamental issue of family care is considered. The mistakes of earlier FFP experienced by the Nordic countries that were based on the traditional division of labour model should be avoided. Even if the gender-neutral model is applied as the basis of the
policy, precautionary steps must be taken so that it does not continue to stereotype women and men’s roles. Therefore, the Malaysian government needs to recognise the contributing power of women in Malaysia and the role of fathers and carers in FFP.

5. Conclusion

While gender-specific policies have significantly advanced gender equality, and improved women’s education and employment opportunities, women are yet to achieve work-life balance. ILO reported that women are still behind men in terms of employment, earnings, and working conditions (2016, p. 1). Apart from that, in the United Nations’ report (2015), it was observed that women worked longer hours than men if unpaid work was included. Even in developed nations, there is still a significant gap between the two genders. There is no doubt that women have gained more control in their lives, nevertheless, the responsibility to care for the family remains a women’s role and thus unchanged. Gupta et al. (2008) warn that an overemphasis on gender-specific or targeted policies will do modern women more disservice as it will hinder their career progression. This is because gender-specific policies were formulated based on women’s role as a mother and a wife instead of as a contributor to the labour market. However, despite this, Malaysia still does not have a policy that supports FWA and its FFP needs improvement. While the private sector is encouraged by the Malaysian government to be active in FFP, policy within the government is mostly absent. Moreover, it must also be realised that FFP in the private sector is considered more as a perk rather than as a requirement.

Malaysia has a long way to go in terms of FFP and FWA. As Malaysian women’s presence is felt more than ever in employment, and men are ready to share the responsibilities at home, policymakers should avoid modelling the FFP based on the traditional division of labour model. Gender-specific policies should be considered if it is aimed at reforming social norms that generally assumes women to be the family caretaker and the male being uninvolved. This will ensure family members, be it the mother, father or carer who looks after the family regardless of gender, could benefit from these policies. Women have always been resilient to the changes of the world but at times, this comes at a cost that is often theirs alone to bear. Besides, women should be able to pursue their career without being the foremost person the family is dependent upon. By reimagining the policies that limit the role of women in Malaysia, women can be empowered.
6. References


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1 In this paper, FFP refers to policies that take into consideration all relevant parties in family care regardless of gender while gender-specific policy is a policy targeted at a specific gender. This paper supports policies that are gender-specific, especially ones that give voice to women, but believes the narratives of all involving parties should be included.


4 FWA is a work arrangement that considers flexibility in a workplace or work time regularly as an alternative of parental leave (see Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Hegewisch, 2009; Subramaniam & Selvaratnam, 2010, p. 44; Workplace Flexibility 2010, 2006)

5 There is, however, no mention of fathers or other carers’ role in these arrangements.