

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first part touches on the importance of legal provision promoting equality among women in the United Kingdom. The second part discusses what steps various players in Malaysia can take towards creating an environment with lesser discrimination. This section presents strategies for change with the involvement and implementation from various parties, namely the Malaysian government, trade unions, employers and women themselves.

5.1 Conclusion

We have come to realise the significant impact working women have on our society. Importantly also for women, is that their participation in paid work has empowered them. Empowerment has given them independence, financial security and a greater role decision making in the household. However, "if women [are continuously] not paid enough to be independent, they [will] remain dependent for survival in male-headed families".³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ Tentler, *opcit*, 13.

There are many factors that have contributed towards women's entry into the workforce. The factors include "rapid industrialisation, the rising level of education among women, changing social attitudes towards women's employment, delayed marriage and declining fertility trends and encouragement".³⁰⁶ Whatever the factors are, women's entry into the work place has been beneficial to themselves, their community and country. A "macroeconomic point of view [concludes] that bringing more women into the labour force is a good thing".³⁰⁷ The working woman is good for the family and the nation's economy. The premise is that "if more people are paying taxes, the burden is spread more widely".³⁰⁸ Women's economic role is also important to the family. Working women will be able to contribute towards the family finances and simultaneously lessen the burden of the husbands as sole breadwinners. Therefore, husbands should encourage their wives to work not only for economic reasons but in order to enable them (husbands) to spend more time raising their children. All these messages convey that the working women phenomenon is good. But are these benefits good enough to warrant women equal pay for *like work, work rated as equivalent and work of equal value*, with their male colleagues?

The impact of wage discrimination has led women to "learn from their low wages, an important lesson about society's valuation of [their] non-domestic roles".³⁰⁹ Women will realise that this is "a man's world, in which women [are] accorded very limited

³⁰⁶ Hedwig Anuar, et.al., "The Singapore Woman", Singapore: Association of Women for Action and Research, 1988.

³⁰⁷ _____, "For Better, For Worse", The Economist, (June 18 1998).

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Tentler, opcit, 13.

place".³¹⁰ Therefore, implications of this study lies in the crucial steps the government, employers and women themselves can initiate either individually or collectively to acknowledge the problem of wage discrimination and strategize for change. The root of the problem is sex-role stereotypes of men and women's role in and outside the work place. Tackling this problem will help women close the wage gap due to discrimination. The study looked at the Equal Pay Act 1970 of the United Kingdom, which is designed to provide gender equality in terms of wages received by men and women. Acknowledging that men and women work in; similar jobs and performed similar tasks or in comparable jobs with men and in jobs, which are of equal in value, the law (Equal Pay Act 1970) still stipulates that men and women should receive equal wages under these instances. However, the three case studies show that even when women working under these instances with their male colleagues, they do still do not receive equal pay. With this realisation, the Equal Pay Act 1970 helps towards eradicating such wage inequalities against working women. If this is a good and exemplary practice, should Malaysia follow suit? Furthermore, in Chapter 4, we explored the inequalities in various aspect of Malaysian life that contribute towards wage discrimination against local working women. Changes in the Malaysian legal framework can be the first step towards achieving equality. Refining the constitution and labour laws of the country will cause a chain effect towards improvement in other aspects discussed in Chapter 4, namely government policies and education system. Therefore, what actions can the government, employers and working women themselves initiate towards achieving equality? Focusing on the discussions presented earlier in Chapter 3 and 4, we have come to the conclusion that the situation of wage discrimination in Malaysian against working women is less than

³¹⁰ Tentler, opcit, 13.

desirable and room for improvement is in order. The following section will conclude the study by presenting strategies for change. This is a daunting task as it includes the three-fold task of overcoming sex-role stereotypes, conquering gender-related job segregation and investing in human capital in order to close the earning gap.

5.2 Strategies for change

As we have established in Chapter 4, various aspects in the Malaysian scenario have been identified as sources of discrimination which lead towards pay inequalities facing Malaysian working women. Therefore, this also means that reforms and changes in these areas are crucial towards alleviating discrimination in general among Malaysian women. The major players for any successful equality initiative will include the government, employers and trade unions and women themselves. The following three sections highlights the role of each player in creating and promoting gender sensitivity and equality in the Malaysian society.

5.2.1 Role of Government

The first target towards making changes is the government. The government has taken steps towards promoting equality among local women through policy efforts. "The concern of the Malaysian government with regards to the status and role of women may be explained by the government's formulation of the National Policy on Women (NPW)

in 1989".³¹¹ Among the main objectives of this policy, one objective stresses that the "objectives of equality and justice must be made the essence of development policies, which must be people oriented so that women who constitute half the nation's population, can contribute and realise their potentials to the optimum".³¹² Therefore, as a "result of the government's serious commitment in policy implementation, women will be recognised in various aspects of Malaysian social life".³¹³ "Though there is no such thing as an absolute protection for women's rights, the Malaysian government spares no opportunity to redress the situation of women".³¹⁴

"In areas where women's rights have been violated or de-emphasised, the governmental machinery [should be] always functional to rectify the condition of women".³¹⁵ The role of the Malaysian government in devising governmental strategies has been identified in enabling women to "play the crucial and significant role they play today".³¹⁶ For example, within the "framework of the National Policy on Women, greater emphasis is placed on the promotion of skills-enhancement activities for women".³¹⁷

The government also needs to concentrate on gender sensitive policies. These policies should be geared towards eradicating discrimination and enhancing women's position and role in society and in the work place. "Governments can offer incentives or

³¹¹ Sha'ban, opcit, 88.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Sha'ban, opcit, 89.

³¹⁴ Sha'ban, opcit, 90.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

³¹⁶ Sha'ban, opcit, 91.

³¹⁷ Sha'ban, opcit, 95.

disincentives [which] make a big difference in the way people organise their lives".³¹⁸ "If governments want women to be able to make a free choice about taking jobs, they need to tailor tax systems to individuals rather than family units".³¹⁹ The Malaysian government may also emulate practices successful in Nordic countries where good quality child-care is widely available and generous maternity and parental-leave is available.³²⁰ With the provision of these benefits, the Nordic countries have "kept birth rate near replacement level even though most women go out to work".³²¹ Incentives, which are offered by these governments also, encourage husbands to share domestic roles with their wives. This enables women to continue working and men to share the responsibility of raising the children.

Another role of the government consists of "convincing women not to exit the labour force".³²² To do so "without changing the traditional balance of family responsibilities requires incentives, monetary and non-monetary, to make it possible for [women] to balance career and family responsibilities".³²³ Furthermore, "the balance of responsibility for child care in particular must be changed if women are to be able to work a larger percentage of their lives in market work. If this is done, then women will have the incentive to invest in more specific human capital and enter on-the-job training programmes in greater numbers".³²⁴ The government can encourage employers by providing "tax incentives to [those] who provide child care facilities at their premises as a

³¹⁸ _____, "Balancing Act", *The Economist*, (June 18 1998).

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ _____, "Balancing Act", *The Economist*, (June 18 1998).

³²¹ *Ibid.*

³²² Jacobsen, *opcit*, 245.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ Jacobsen, *opcit*, 246.

way to encourage women with children to remain more permanently in employment".³²⁵ Other developed countries have also implemented incentives in the form of "subsidisi[ed] child-care and giving either tax allowances for children or some form of direct child benefits".³²⁶

Finally, the government should also identify the various employment sectors in the country which are mostly occupied by women and target training and educational programmes in these sectors. Investing in human capital will help women in these occupational categories, move up the employment rung or provide a greater choice of career opportunities.

5.2.2 Role of Employers

Women's entry into the work place "did not automatically lead to greater equality in the work place or to changes in public attitudes regarding men's and women's family roles".³²⁷ Sex-role stereotype is still very much a way of life and women are subject to discrimination because of this. Various research have stated that employers, trade unions and governments discriminate against all women because they were regard[ed] as marginal and temporary workers.³²⁸ The "idea that men [are] breadwinners and that [the] women's place [is] in the home"³²⁹ only serves to reinforce the traditional model in discriminating women in the work place. Employers should be made aware of the

³²⁵ Maimunah, opcit, 22.

³²⁶ "Balancing Act", The Economist, (June 18 1998).

³²⁷ Staggenborg, opcit, 85.

³²⁸ Chafe, opcit, 30.

potential of women and their contribution. Women in the work force enable employers "to draw on a larger pool of available workers [which helps] improve the quality of labour, reduces the risk of shortages and raises demand".³³⁰ With these benefits, employers should be increasing their efforts towards attracting and sustaining women in the work force.

To help employers achieve this, they should look at the benefits of technology, not only as potential for economic gains but also as a tool of enticing and keeping women into the work force. India, one of the world's most traditional societies, is a good example of the potential of technology in creating a better work environment for women. The "software boom is offering new liberties to a small but influential group of women".³³¹ These groups of women in the software technology industry, range from programmers to project managers at top companies in India. These women are experiencing equality in and outside the home. Liberties extend to "deciding if and when they want to marry and whether they want to have children".³³² Furthermore, these Indian women are also "commanding unusual respect from family members, who grant them 'male' privileges [such as] exemption from housework and a say in household finances".³³³ Technology also serves to liberate women in the work place. Studies show that women concentrated "in the clerical sector where [they] have traditionally held subordinate positions, technology can be used to eliminate inequalities in society [whereby] it can be used as a

³²⁹ Chafe, *opcit*, 30.

³³⁰ _____, "For Better, For Worse", *The Economist*, (June 18 1998).

³³¹ Chen, May Yee, "India's Other Tech Revolution", *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2000.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*

tool to liberate women so they can play a more active and responsible role in their work place".³³⁴

Another sure method of encouraging women to the work force is through employers commitment towards enhancing skills and knowledge through training programmes or sponsorship of educational programmes for women. Investing in human capital acquired by women will help improve productivity and the quality of work. Employers should also be open and advocate mentor programmes. These programmes are mutually beneficial for women and employers. Mentor programmes have an overall effect of providing a healthy work environment for women. Furthermore, mentor programmes are crucial for women aiming to break into managerial positions as it provides on-the-job training by the mentor on coping skills and provides "detailed knowledge of how to handle both peers and subordinates, exercise and feel comfortable with power".³³⁵ Mentoring is also beneficial to the employers because it forms an "informal communication network".³³⁶ Going a step further, a mentoring programme involving female students in a local college or university will help employers' train prospective future employees. This will help break the barrier women facing in entering 'male dominated' occupations. Furthermore, training these programmes provide will help towards reducing gender-related job segregation and present new opportunities for working women.

³³⁴ Scott, Joan and Louise Tilly, "The Changing Experience of Women: Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe", London: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

³³⁵ Vinnicombe, opcit, 83.

³³⁶ Ibid.

5.2.3 Role of Trade Unions

Trade unions are also another body, which can help alleviate women's position in the work force. Trade unions are "forces for social and political change with an influence".³³⁷ "Worker's unions in Malaysia were established during the British colonisation in the 1930's". During that period, the "Malays were predominantly involved in the agricultural sector [while] the Malaysian trade unions were run by the Chinese Malaysians [and] the Indian Malaysians were involved in the services sector".³³⁸ "Through strikes and refusal to work many goals were gained".³³⁹ Women workers in plantations recorded an early victory in the wage and salary area by claiming an increase in payroll from their employers".³⁴⁰ "The victory encouraged the union of the women workers on plantations to go ahead and call for more gains".³⁴¹ "By the beginning of the 1950's this union succeeded in bringing up the issue of equal pay for its members".³⁴² "This achievement positively helped in defeating the old cultural belief that women's salary was only compensational substitutive".³⁴³ The role trade unions in the past are beneficial towards the overall struggle facing working women.

The role of trade unions in the present times is also important in fighting discrimination and promoting equality for working women. Recently, in Malaysia it was reported on March, 8 2001, that "female bank employees will be given MYR500 as

³³⁷ Bullock, *opcit*, 127.

³³⁸ Vinnicombe, *opcit*, 82.

³³⁹ Vinnicombe, *opcit*, 83.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁴¹ Vinnicombe, *opcit*, 84.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

reimbursement of delivery charges for up to two children under a new collective agreement".³⁴⁴ The secretary-general of the National Union of Bank Employees of Malaysia, noted that this incentive would help women who constitute sixty five percent of the clerical and non-clerical staff in the banking sector in Malaysia.³⁴⁵ The article also quoted the secretary-general as highlighting that the move was also motivated as it will be able to help "retain trained staff and most employees in Malaysia trained in information technology are females".³⁴⁶ Therefore, trade unions are crucial in helping working women seek for a better working environment. It also helps raise awareness of the importance of women working and that efforts should be taken to retain them.

5.2.4 Role of Women

Malaysian women also need to play an important role in alleviating the problem of discrimination of any kind in the work place. Women should look towards networking, which is an important channel for women to provide support for each other. Networking is "women response to the 'old boy's network'".³⁴⁷ It encourages the "exchange and mutual support without the formality of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures".³⁴⁸ It also helps "break down barriers that appear to separate women".³⁴⁹ Networking will work towards promoting equality because it establishes a support system by women for women. Exchanging of ideas and experience among one another will help encourage

³⁴⁴ Muthiah, Wani, "Confinement reimbursement perk for female bank staff", *The Star*, (March 8, 2001): 1-

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³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Vinnicombe, *opcit*, 83.

³⁴⁸ Bullock, *opcit*, 127.

³⁴⁹ Bullock, *opcit*, 128.

women to face difficulties, build confidence in meeting challenges in the work place and create and educate women on their rights.

Women also have a role in combating wage discrimination. Women should first look to education towards empowerment. "As women continue to enter graduate programmes in greater numbers, their increased human capital in the form of formal education will pay off in terms of higher earnings".³⁵⁰ However, this alone is not enough. Instead, women need to "alter the mix of human capital [they] receive through formal education [by] choosing those forms with higher payoff rates".³⁵¹ In addition, educational programmes [with] scholarships and loan paybacks can serve as incentives for women to enter non-traditional majors that help develop skills in high demand in the labour market.³⁵² "One way to influence the amount and type of human capital received by women is to enrol them in government-subsidised training programmes to prepare them to enter male-dominated occupations".³⁵³

Lastly, society as a whole should alleviate women's role in the home and society and changing attitudes is a crucial step towards this. As mentioned earlier, education is the key towards achieving this. Society needs to make an effort towards creating a better environment for women by understanding the fact that "women are not only important beneficiaries of development, but essential engines for it".³⁵⁴ Therefore "enhancing the

³⁵⁰ Jacobsen, *opcit*, 244.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ Jacobsen, *opcit*, 245.

³⁵⁴ Sadik, *opcit*, 3.

status of women is essential for social, political and economic progress".³⁵⁵ However, this may prove to be a challenge for all. Women's role in social, political and economic progress may not fully materialise as long as gender equality is not achieved. Simply put, equality for women is development and progress for all.

³⁵⁵ Sadik, *opcit*, 3.