CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Malaysia has been enjoying a robust economy since late 1980s, continued in 1995 with gross domestic product (GDP) growth improving to 9.6 percent. The government has also claimed that during this period, inflation rates have been kept at the rate of less than 4 percent per annum for the last twenty years. The sustained rapid growth was accompanied by dramatic decline in the rate of unemployment and the rise in the standard of living. This success can be attributed to the economic policy (Industrialisation), which was geared towards export and intensive labour production. The structural transformation of the economy since 1980s is evident from the growth of the manufacturing and service sector in the GDP. Malaysia's impressive economic growth has led to a greater participation of women in the formal workforce. However the onset of financial crisis in the second half of 1997 severely disrupted the Malaysian economy. There was a 1.8 percent fall in the GDP in the first half of 1998 (Aminah Ahmad, 1998). The worst hit sectors were construction and manufacturing. The official data showed that a total of 46,643 workers were retrenched from July 1997 until June 1998 (Aminah Ahmad, 1998). The manufacturing sector accounted for 60.5 percent of them and women accounted for 38.4 percent of workers retrenched up to May 1998. Nevertheless, the economy recovered very quickly, regaining the pre-crisis growth momentum by 2000. This is evident from the manufacturing sector and labour market flexibility. However,
Malaysia was able to withstand the crisis with little adverse impact on employment and living standard. From the above it is quite clear that the rapid economic growth in Malaysian economy before the financial crisis is largely due to the industrialization concentrating on the manufacturing and services sectors. The agriculture sector, which contributed 29 percent to the country GDP in 1970 declined to 19 percent in 1984 and to 18.7 percent in 1990 and further, declined to 13.4 percent in 2000 (6th Malaysian Plan, 1991). However, the contribution of manufacturing sector to GDP has been showing a significant increase from 13.9 percent in 1970 to 37.2 percent in 2000 (7th Malaysian Plan, 1996).

Firstly, this development has been accompanied by changes in the levels of labour force participation among women in the economy. Secondly, it has resulted women in work force to be concentrated in certain sectors of the economy. Women predominate in certain sectors such as clerical work, nursing, teaching and other services. Until today, women are under represented in sectors like mining, construction and quarry. This simply implies that women have been “trapped” by their gender in their choice of employment (Samshulbahriah Ku Ahmad, 1994).

In the development decades of 1960s and 1970s, the economic policies and planning seemed to be more favorable for men, thereby adversely affecting women. But the declaration of the Women’s Decade (1975-1985) by UN has created ongoing efforts to integrate and increase the role of women in the development process. The Malaysian government has shown its support by allocating funds and setting up organization such as
Advisory Council on Women in development (NACIWID) and HAWA. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the Sixth and Seventh Malaysian Plan emphasized the formulation of National Action Plan, which was to incorporate women in the process of development and concerted efforts will be made to progressively reduce the existing constraints. It is stated in the Eighth Malaysian Plan that efforts will continue to be undertaken to further enhance the role, position and their participation as well as involvement in the social and economy of the country.

Issues concerning female labour participation and their contribution to the economy have been discussed in depth by many prominent researchers. Therefore, I can say that these issues are not relatively new issues but which has however always attracted students and researchers to continuously investigate and analyse the women development in Malaysia.

The next section will look at the attitude toward women's role in the society, the hurdle and barriers women face for advancement and the lack of occupational and professional opportunities because they are 'women'.

2.2 Attitude Towards Women's Role in Society

In Malaysia as elsewhere in the world, traditional gender ideology as enforced by culture remains strong and despite the recent processes of economic transformation blurring the distinction between the work roles played by men and women in overall society, the gender division of labor in the home remains as entrenched as ever. (Jamilah Ariffin, 1995)
In Malaysia, there is a core of preferred feminine attributes. They are of course defined in terms of our image of the ideal women. While female attributes and behaviour may vary somewhat among Malay, Chinese or Indian women for instance, across groups and classes, the basic component of the female role is becoming a wife. Thus these women become the center of the home crowned with the virtue of compliance and devoted primarily to the family. She must be willing to accept the rule and domination of the male.

The image of the ideal female includes as well characteristics like passive, emotional, gentle, loveable, etc. The problem is when measured against this yardstick of ideal female, the dedicated and assertive career women seem to be the antithesis of the feminine women. It is precisely this set of notions that constitutes a barrier or the iron curtain of gender ideology to women aiming high in the occupational world (Noraini, 1993).

Since prevailing notions still hold women responsible for the well-being of children, husband and the aged, it has enforced on working women an impossibly heavy load involving outside work, care for child, spouse and now with an increasingly aging population, care of the old and infirm. For centuries, poor women have stoically borne this load silently. Today, because of inflation, more well off women are also feeling the stress of overwork (Yun H.A., 1996).
A study carried out by Illo, on the Bicol River Basin society in the Philippines revealed that women as well as men agree that a woman’s proper place is in the home (Illo, 1977). This has not changed much to date. If such cultural norms predominate, then women’s work activities are confined to the home, where they do not conflict with their primary duties to watch their children and keep the household going (Illo J.F., 1977).

Throughout the world, women’s contribution to the economic development has been overlooked. Very few countries included the gender-dimension in their policy formulation, planning, implementation or even compilation of data.

In his paper “Problems and Prospects of Self-Employed Women”, S. Panandiker speaks of the problems women in India face. The biggest and the primary challenge she has to face is the attitude of society towards her and constraints in which she has to live and work. In spite of the constitutional equality, in practice the attitude of men not only of tradition bound village men but even those who are responsible for decision making, planning and research is not of equality. They still suffer from male reservation about women’s role and capacity.

This attitude or reservation creates difficulties and problems at all levels, for instance family support, training and marketing. Women in non-urban areas have to suffer still further. They have to face not only resistance or reservation of men but also of elderly women who are ingrained with this attitude of inequality.
The paper on “Supporting The Female Entrepreneur” by Dr. Nellie S.I. Tan Wong stated that the 1993 UN Human Development reported that throughout the world, women are the neglected majority. Only 33 countries kept gender-based statistics to make comparisons. Among the worst was Japan, which ranked No. 1 in the UN’s 1993 Human Development Index but dropped to No. 17 when gender difference is considered. The report said that discrimination against women in industrialized countries is mainly in employment and wages with women earning half the salary of man whereas in developing countries, it shows disparities also occur in healthcare, nutrition and education (Nellie, 1993).

Malaysia is no exception when it comes to gender-sensitivity. Any issues pertaining to the contribution of women to the progress and development of the economy was only included in the Sixth Malaysian Plan (1991-1996). Most of the women who championed for this have commented on the amount of effort and problems they faced even to have this inclusion and worst still all that the outcome centred on was basic human rights. The goals of the national Policy on women as set out in the Sixth Malaysian Plan are: “To ensure equitable sharing in the acquisition or resources and information, as well as access to opportunities and benefits of development, for both women and men”.

It took fourteen years after the launching of International Women’s Year in 1975 for the Malaysian Government to approve the Women’s National Policy on 12th December 1989. The Malaysian culture has relegated women to the lower management levels and as such the Malaysian men are accustomed to having the Malaysian women to take a ‘back-seat’.
The hiring organization is biased in favour of men and women have been steered into and remain primarily in the lower management level and clerical jobs.

The Malaysian women, unlike the men, have to juggle between their careers and their family. Schwartz (1989) categorises women into two groups, i.e. the career women and the career and family women. These groups are present among the Malaysian women. The career women are ready to make the same trade-offs made by men who seek leadership positions. They put in extra hours and sacrifice their personal lives in the pursuit of a successful career. The women remain single or at least childless or if they do have children, are satisfied to have others to raise them. These women should be gainfully employed and encouraged to get to the top of their profession.

At present, all the effort of championing for the Malaysian women is gradually demonstrating positive results. According to the 1998 Human Development report, Malaysia ranked 45th out of 165 countries. Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) examines whether women and men are able to participate in economic and political life. In the GEM, Malaysia ranked 45th out of 102 countries. In general, Malaysia compares favourably with the regional comparators in terms of human achievement particularly in gender empowerment (Country Assistance Plan 2000-2002, December 1999).

However the fact that there exists a cultural expectation that rearing a family should be a woman’s primary responsibility remains strong. The image society has about women poses a lot of problem for them in the organizational structure. It is exactly this attitude
that constitutes a barrier or the iron curtain of gender ideology to women aiming high in the occupational world.

2.3 Glass Ceiling

Women have to work harder to outperform and gain promotion. They face more barriers to advancement than do the men. First they may have to surmount a hurdle of prejudice. Male chauvinism can be of the conscious or unconscious variety. There are traditional and cultural constraints that restrict the so-called ‘weaker sex’ to sex-labeled roles in society and in the organizational structure. Women become victims of stereotyping. A woman may also face special problems like sexual harassment in the work place.

Men grow up knowing they have the authority, they make major decisions, women on the other hand are told about a women’s role, a women’s place and that no one can question it. The next outcome is a division of labour that hinges on gender and that division of labor has led to a division of authority as well. Man’s authority is accorded greater weight and prestige. As a result because of their physical characteristics and the connotations attached to being female, women have been subjected to the definition of masculine and feminine responsibilities.

Today’s women are well educated, however in the gender framework within which we operate education and one’s capabilities are evidently not enough (Noraini, 1993). Women being the minority in strategic positions and women being last in the changing world of work are still vulnerable (Kalsom Taib, 1994).
Women employees are only valued when times are good like what Pn. Kalsom has stated in her paper on “Opportunities- The world available to women”. In an environment of full employment, the economy cannot afford to continue to allow part of its human capital to go under-utilised. Companies introduced innovative measures to attract, retain and motivate the female workforce, the personnel manuals were no longer sexist, the salary depended on the level of job, grade and performance and not on sex. Childcare facilities and Flexi-hours were practiced (Kalsom Taib, 1994). But what happened when the economic crisis set in? ..... Women were the first group of employees to be retrenched.

The Countries Assistance Plan (2000-2002) reported that women have been particularly affected at the work place after the crisis. It was estimated that two thirds retrenched in textile and electronic industries were women.

Men who are not sensitive to the needs of women workers by and large dominate Trade Unions. For example, the issue of sexual harassment at work is not taken seriously (Cecilia N, 1999).

As of March 1994, the MAI.COM Union had about 17,000 members – 13,027 are men and 3,891 are women (23 percent) reflecting an under-representation of female union members, who form 35 percent of non-executive staff. Recently a women’s section was set up and the extent of support for women-focused activities among the predominantly male-dominated leadership at the national and branch levels to be seen (Cecilia N, 1996).
2.4 Lack of Occupation and Professional Opportunity

A study carried out by Anne Jacintha on the percentage of women in the Managerial Professional field compared to the other groups for different industrial group reveal that most of the women employed are engaged in clerical jobs followed by manual jobs. More women are found in the Managerial-Professional group than in the Technical-Vocational group.

The result indicates that the fairer sex dominates the Clerical group. These women are in careers, which are unchallenging and routine. In addition, these careers do not require decision-making or creativity, ingenuity and leadership qualities.

Her study also reveals that more women are involved in Managerial –Professional group than in the Technical-Vocational ones. The results suggest that women have inherent talent for jobs of this nature since the cultural norms and practices in Malaysia have made the technical field a predominantly male one. Malaysian women have yet to penetrate the top management level. Women are employed in the middle and lower management levels in all industrial groups except for the Construction where there are none at all.

It indicates that Malaysian women have not succeeded in occupying the top management level post in the industrial group studied. The positions available at the top are limited. As such there is stiff competition among potential top executives for such positions. Women have to face not only the competition from male managers but also male
prejudices toward women manager. A Harvard Business Review article report findings that managers are biased in favor of males and therefore women have been steered into staff positions. In addition, stalwarts any attempt by women in penetrating the barriers or in increasing their participation in top management level (Anne Jacintha, 1990).

In Malaysia, the different cultural background of the different races further complicates sex discrimination. Sarachek et al 1984 reports that the Malaysian Chinese are more receptive to women in the workplace than the Malay men.

Based on the above, it can be derived that there is a common belief that the process of female employment development is cultural prone and that various socio-cultural variables influence the process. These beliefs exist in government and the private sector and the women themselves.