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## A Quality of Women Empowerment in Malaysia: Concept Paper

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### Abstract

Women empowerment has always been an issue discussed around the globe including in Malaysia. Generally, the Government of Malaysia acknowledged that women should be given equal opportunities and treatment in terms of educational, social, and economic positions. With support from the government, women's empowerment in Malaysia has been included as part of the national agenda. This paper ascertains the quality of women's empowerment by understanding the situation in the labor workforce, educational, social, economic, and political. By having the understanding, recommendations are proposed to reduce the gap between the current situation to the desired state of quality in women empowerment. Additionally, this paper provides readers the idea and areas of improvement in the quality of women's empowerment which detailed research and study could be conducted. Thus, women's empowerment in Malaysia would be better in the future.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Educational, Economy and Politic.

### Introduction

In today's modern world, where technology has impacted the human lifestyle, the issues on women empowerment have still been discussed globally, including in Malaysia. The issues began with the qualities of right between men and women and in a later part to the key positions women holding in government and private sector in Malaysia.

Malaysia Government supports the women right with the establishment of Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCDD). The ministry has been established since 17 January 2001, which was 20 years ago. Among the objectives of the ministry are to empower women and achieve common well-being. To achieve the objectives, a few strategies have been planned. Firstly, is to review the existing laws and regulations and propose a w legislation if needed. Secondly, the access of information and communication technology

(ICT) have to be expanded to women, families and society. Thirdly, the information on facilities and services available at various agencies and organizations that provides services to assist women should be appropriately and timely disseminated.

The government also has included the gender equality and women rights as part of Sustainable Development Goals and the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (RMK11). This shows that the government is committed and takes women empowerment issues seriously.

### **Background of The Study**

In simple words, power means a person have control over something or to another person. Whilst empower means giving a power to other parties in order to make the parties become a better person. In the context of giving empowerment to women or women empowerment, it can be defined as the development of women who are politically active, economically productive, and capable of making their own decisions.

In the context of a quality, quality could be subjective and depends on an individual perspective. It is rather on how an individual perceive a subject with criteria being set. This paper aims to ascertain the quality of women empowerment in Malaysia particularly in the workforce, education, politics and environment social, economic and politics.

### **Problem Statement**

Women in many developing countries continue to be denied their basic rights and needs. One study defined empowerment as the innovation of the resources and capacities of different individuals and groups to engage, influence and empower the institutions that concern them. Women empowerment is an important element in transforming a developing country toward a modern and intellectual developed country (Prachi & Gupta, 2013). In today's world, women should be given the same level of power as men. It is now to remove the notion that men are the sole holders of power.

Based on the data from Department of Statistic Malaysia (DOSM), Malaysia's population has been estimated at 32.7 million in 2020 which has increased from 32.5 million in 2019, with an annual growth rate of 0.4 percent. The decline in the population growth rate is due to a reduction in the number of non-citizens from 3.1 million in 2019 to 3.0 million in 2020. In 2020, the male population exceed women from 16.8 million for men as compared 15.9 million for women. Males outnumbered females in both the young in the range of 0 to 14 years old and working age 15years old to 64 years old. On the other hand, women outnumbered men in the old-age group between 65 year old and up with 1.2 million, while men closely behind with only 1.1 million in 2020. With the number of populations shows that women are less than men, then logically, the men will dominant the women in most area, given it in the educational aspects, social and workforce. Thus, the women empowerment agenda planned by MWFCDD would be difficult to be achieved.

Today, there are many programmes and initiatives conducted to empowering women and a lot of money have been spent for these purposes. Nevertheless, the results of the programmes and initiatives could be questionable. With a glance, the reality seems to be that the women empowerment in Malaysia seem far behind. Therefore, it is vital to conduct a check and balance on what is happening on the paper as compared to the real life. It is

harnessed to capitalise on women's abilities, regardless of which social class they belong. All efforts will only provide minimal results unless the society accepts the gender equality as a fundamental principle of human in real life. For a well-balanced development, not only sociological but also mathematical factors must be considered (Prachi & Gupta, 2013). This can be initiated by works together with women at the grassroots level, focus on the increasing women's ability to and control over resources as well as power given to them in making decision. Working on improving women's mobility and social interaction in society would have a positive impact on their overall development and empowerment.

### **The Gap in Research**

A few research and study have been published related to women empowerment in Malaysia. Lilian (2014) found empowerment and women factory workers in Malaysia. Another study found the contribution of non-conventional microfinancing on economic, social and household empowerment of women borrowers in Malaysia (Haque et. al., 2021). There is also a study that focuses on the challenges of women empowerment in a private organization in Malaysia (Narayanan & Selvanathan, 2017). As of the date this study reported, there is a few studies issued focusing on the quality of women empowerment in Malaysia. Thus, this study is focused on an intention to view the quality of women empowerment in Malaysia in the area of gender inequality in workforce, educational, politics and government, and economy.

### **A Quality of Women Empowerment**

#### **Gender Inequality in Workforce**

The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women is a widespread topic that is actively debated today. Gender inequality between men and women would be varies according to geographical, social life, and other factors. However, in most of the countries the men have usually been given more value and appreciation compare to women. On the other hand, women should be able to participate and give wide opportunity in the same economic activities outside the home as same as their male counterparts in order to minimise the reliance and poverty rates among women. Women should have the ability to make decisions that affect their life. Based on the previous study showed that gender inequality was found to be a significant source of women's disempowerment (Uyang et al., 2016).

Gender inequality is at the root of the world's inability to end poverty. For decades, women have been disproportionately left behind. They are constantly confronted with systemic obstacles and discrimination, which violates women's fundamental human rights and prevents them from easily accessing any resources. Hasin et. al (2018) state that, women that have an innate and untapped potential to act as change agents in their societies and communities, and they must have the inherent right to make decisions that affect them and their families.

On March 2021, Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) report by gender found the LFPR for male to be 81 percent meanwhile the LFPR for female increase to 55 percent. Beside that, male labour force increased by 0.2 percent to 9.84 million on February 2021. On the other hand, the female workforce increased from 11.8 thousand people from February 2021 to 6.24 million. Male's LFPR increased 0.3 percent over year meanwhile female LFPR declined by 0.3 percent.

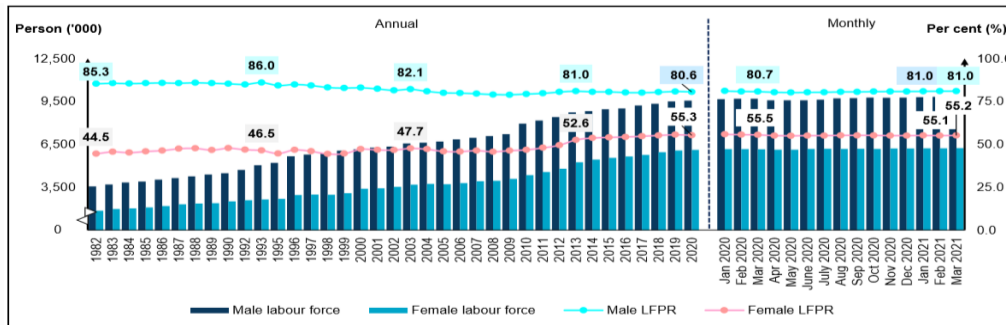


Chart 1: Labor force and LFPR by sex, 1982 - 2020 and January 2020 – March 2021 (Source://www.dosm.gov.my)

In 2019, the statistic shows that the percentage of women 44.3 percent work as professional and technical workers were less than men 55.7 percent. However, Grant Thornton’s Annual Women in Business report showed a favourable result to the women which the report disclosed the percentage of women holding senior position in Malaysia has increased year by year, and the latest was 37 percent.

As a result, gender equality is critical in assessing the quality of women's empowerment in the workplace. Without fair and equal treatment or opportunity for women, they cannot demonstrate that they can provide a quality of women empowerment.

**Education**

Education is an effective tool in the women's liberation and empowerment. Education is the most powerful factor that significantly improve the status of women in society. It is so important that it not only helps women gain better knowledge about the world but it also helps them to gain trust, positive self-esteem and self-confidence. It is necessary courage and inner strength to face life's challenges. It appears that it also makes it easier for them to find work, supplement their family's income, and achieve social status.

Mahatma Gandhi have quotes that, “If you can educate a man means that you are educate an individual person, but if you can educate a woman means that you are educate the entire and whole of the family”. Most parents fail to see the value of educating their daughters. This is a point dispute for women's empowerment. Previous study found that there are big issue and huge gaps in school enrolment. Mostly all boys are in primary school only result show that only three out of four girls are in primary school (Uyang et al., 2016). In addition, parents see little economic benefit in educating their daughters. There are believe that daughters are thought to be less willing to participate in household chores and care for their younger siblings.

Less than half of all children in many developing countries complete high school and girls are much less likely than boys. This refusal has crucial implications for the empowerment of women. Besides that, education is one of a critical component in women empowering as it enables them to seize the opportunities, challenge their traditional roles or practices and change their current and future lives. Not only that, education also is one of the most important ways to equip or prepare women with the knowledge, skills and capabilities that they need to participate fully in the development process. Now we are seeing that a constant increase in the number of women enrolled in schools, colleges, and even in professional

institutes. This statement was supported by previous study by (Sowjanya & Hans, 2015) state that education is seen as an important step in empowering women because it enables them to face the challenges and also to approach their traditional roles or practices that can change their life.

According to the Statistics On Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia (2019) the women literacy rate for the age group of 15-64 years was 96.3 percent as compared to the men 97 percent with the same age group. There is only a small gap of 0.7 percent between women and men. Additionally, the report also disclosed that women in tertiary education outnumbered men, where women scored 50.3 percent as compared to men 37.8 percent. These numbers show favour towards women which could indicate that the quality of women empowerment in education.

According to the previous case study, education has a positive correlation and a significant impact on the quality of women's empowerment. We can conclude that education has a significant impact on women's empowerment. People cannot grow and develop their own capabilities unless they have adequate knowledge and skills.

### **Politics and Government**

Malaysia government shows its commitment to women empowerment by including the agenda in five years national plan framework. The fifth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of United Nation (UN) is to attain gender equality and to promote women empowerment. Malaysia's government has adopted this goal as its commitment towards more sustainable, resilient and inclusive development. The government has established SDGs governance structure in Malaysia which is headed by National SDG Council (Council). This Council plans and monitors direction for implementation, set national agenda and milestones, roadmap formulating, monitoring the targets' progress, identify issues and prepare reports to the UN High Level Political Forum. (SDG Roadmap for Malaysia Phase I 2016-2020, 2021)

The goal has been incorporated in RMK11 under one of its strategic thrusts which is to enhance inclusiveness that aims for an equitable society, more specifically under its strategy B3 which will focus on reinforcing the involvement of women in development (Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2015). This goal has continued to be the nation's focus in Twelfth Malaysia Plan (RMK12). To realise the alignment of implementation of SDGs and RMK11, the government has done phase 1 of the implementation which is an exercise to map and integrate the initiatives, action plans and outcomes in RMK11 to the goals, targets and indicators of SDG. The target of the strategy B3 of RMK11 is to focus on women participation in the workforce. It aims for 59% women participation in the workforce by 2020. The action plan is to create a more attractive working environment such as availability of quality early childcare and childhood education, work-life balance and working arrangement flexibility. This strategy also aims to increase the number of women in decision-making positions by improve the opportunities available to gain the required knowledge and experience. Talent Corp has led an initiative called "Back to Work" programmes which reassure qualified women to return to the workforce. (Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2015)

Mid-Term Review of the RMK11 (MTR) reported that in 2017, 54.7 percent of labour force participation rate is female, which has shown improvement as compared to 54.1 percent in

2015. The slow progress of the female labour force participation rate was somewhat due to a low commitments and resources among employers to offer a more conducive working environment. Meanwhile, in the public sector recorded that there is 35.6 percent women in upper positions while in 2015 at 32.5 percent (Mid-Term Review of the Eleventh Malaysia Plan, 2018), which has surpassed the gender quota policy of 30 percent in the public sector (Syahirah et al., 2016).

MTR has set new focuses for 2018-2020 which are six policy pillars that replaced 6 strategic thrusts of RMK11. The strategy on reinforcement of women involvement in development is under strategy A4 of Pillar II: Enhancing Inclusive Development and Wellbeing. The strategies under RMK11 were continued to be implemented. In addition, a joint effort between government agencies, corporate sector and civil society organizations will be refined under National Policy on Women in the 13 strategic thrusts which covers overall aspects including but not limited to economy, law, education, health, culture and politics.

Malaysia has reported its SDGs Voluntary National Review 2021 to show the progress of SDGs adoption. The performance of the fifth goal which is to attain gender equality and to promote women empowerment is illustrated in Chart 2 below.

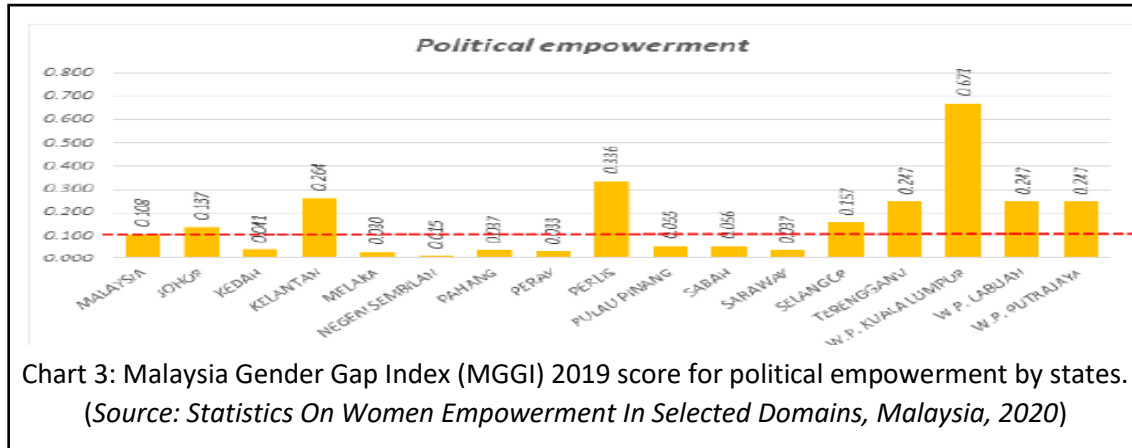
**Goal 5: Gender Equality**

| No. | Available indicators   | Year | Value | Year | Value | Year | Value | Sources  |
|-----|--|------|-------|------|-------|------|-------|--|
| 1.  | Number of non-muslim women aged 20-24 years old who were married before 18 years | 2017 | 2,663 | 2018 | 2,496 | 2019 | 2,392 | National Registration Department   |
| 2.  | a. Seats held by women in Senate (%)   | 2017 | 17.0  | 2018 | 17.0  | 2019 | 18.0  | Parliament of Malaysia   |
|     | b. Seats held by Parliament of Malaysia women in House of Representatives (%)    | 2017 | 10.9  | 2018 | 14.4  | 2019 | 14.9  | Parliament of Malaysia   |
|     | c. Seats held by women as Cabinet Ministers (%)                                  | 2017 | 8.6   | 2018 | 17.9  | 2019 | 17.9  | Parliament of Malaysia   |
|     | d. Seats held byParliament of Malaysia women as Deputy Ministers (%)             | 2017 | 15.2  | 2018 | 14.8  | 2019 | 15.4  | Parliament of Malaysia   |
| 3.  | Women in managerial positions (%)  | 2017 | 22.1  | 2018 | 24.7  | 2019 | 23.3  | Labour Force Survey, Department of Statistics Malaysia                                     |
| 4.  | Women aged 15-49 who use contraceptive use (%)                                   |      |       |      |       | 2014 | 89.3  | National Population & Family Development Board   |
| 5.  | Mobile phone ownership by individuals (%)  | 2017 | 95.5  | 2018 | 96.0  | 2019 | 95.7  | ICT Use and Access by Individuals and Households Survey, Department of Statistics Malaysia |

Chart 2: SDGs Performance by Indicators (*Source: Malaysia Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2021*)

The commitment shown by the government is crucial in leading and encouraging other sectors to join together realising this national agenda. Despite the continuous effort, initiatives and action plans developed by the government, there seems lack of implementation in the government sector. Seats held by women in Senate only increased by 1 percent from 2017 to 2019. While seats held by women as Deputy Ministers only increased

by 0.2 percent. There was a dropped in the percentage of women in managerial positions from 2018 to 2019 by 1.4 percent. Women empowerment in politics remain registered the lowest score from 2017 with a score of 0.061 to 2019 with a score of 0.108. The following Chart 3 shows Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) score for political empowerment by states in 2019.



The government needs to show more progress in women empowerment in its sector before expecting other sectors to support, commit and invest in empowering women. To improve the quality of women empowerment, government’s action plans need to be communicated and shared to all level and sectors. Attractive incentives offer by government would be great encouragement to corporate sectors as they may be eager to support the initiatives but resource scarcity may hinder the vast implementation.

### Economy

Women made up 39.1 percent of the labour force in Malaysia but with only 55 percent LFPR. The contribution to the economic activity is far below men with 80.8 percent LFPR (Labour Market Review Q2, 2021). Economic participation and opportunity MGGI score in 2019 were at 0.717, meanwhile, the achievement of women in the sub-index of educational attainment has surpassed men with a score of 1.053 (Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2020). However, Graduates Labour Force Participation Rate (GLFPR) in 2020 were 82.0 percent, an increase of 2.2 percent as against 79.8 percent in the previous year for women which were lower than male, recorded at 88.5 percent in 2020 which has increased 0.8 percent from 2019 to 87.7 percent (Graduates Statistics, 2020, 2021). This may be due to the general perception that women’s role was to maintain the structure of the family and no employment opportunity was given to them (Saqib et al., 2016).

Rising numbers of well-educated women enlarged the nation’s talent pool which will directly have a positive impact on economic growth. Women participation in labour force would increase domestic economic activity and boost household income. As a primary person in charge of household spending, women with higher earnings would be more likely to have higher spending (Saqib et al., 2016) which will boost the domestic economy. With higher earnings, women tend to spend more on luxury, expensive and higher quality goods. Survey findings indicated that median monthly salaries for men have constantly been higher than women since 2010 (Salaries & Wages Survey Report Malaysia 2020, 2021). The median and mean monthly salaries and wages of employees by sex in Malaysia for 2015 – 2020 is shown in the following Chart 2.



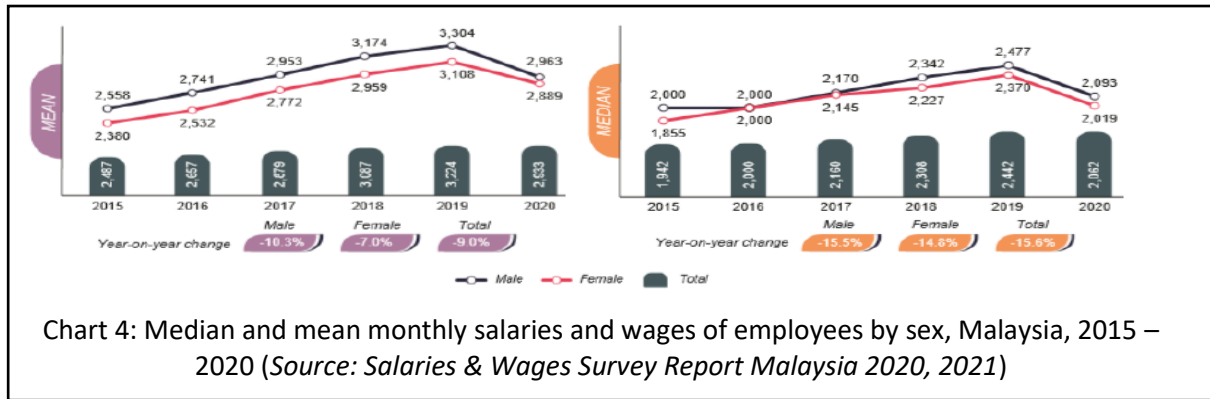


Chart 4: Median and mean monthly salaries and wages of employees by sex, Malaysia, 2015 – 2020 (Source: Salaries & Wages Survey Report Malaysia 2020, 2021)

This could be resulted from an unfairness access of job opportunities between men and women. To ensure quality empowerment of women in the economy, women must have access to better jobs opportunities, pay and a conducive environment that support and meet their need for work-life balance (Sohail, 2014). High earning women will be able to afford and have access to quality things such as healthy food for family, house in good neighbourhood and school district, comfortable car and high education. This will also indirectly enhance their social status.

**The Proposed of Conceptual Framework for a Quality Women Empowerment**

The Feminist Theory in Sociology highlights gender differences and inequality. This theory has been further discussed by (Huges, 2002). There are 6 concepts that relate to theory. Equality, difference, and choice are among the 3 out of 6 concepts that have been discussed. Issues on the inequality of wages between men and women, women educational level and involvement of women in politics highlighted by the concept are much related and aligned to the quality of women empowerment in Malaysia.

Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual framework for high-quality women empowerment. It demonstrates the current conditions and the outcomes of high-quality women's empowerment.

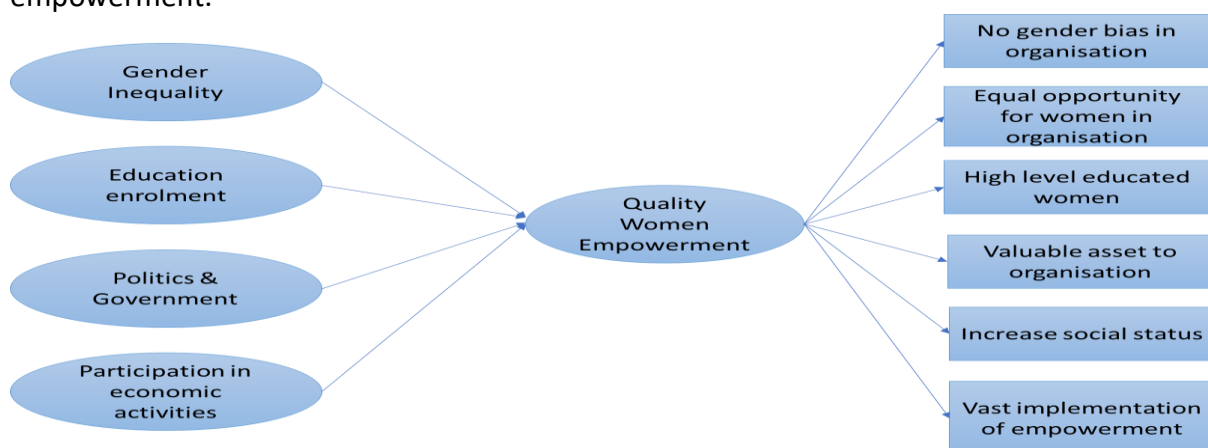


Figure 1: The Proposed of Conceptual Framework for a Quality Women Empowerment.

Women's education levels should be raised in order to improve women's empowerment. Women with a high level of education may be able to participate in the labor force alongside men. Should the woman succeed in her career, she should be given a fair chance to hold a

key position in an organization. Women who hold key positions will not only be a valuable asset to the organization, but will also raise their social status.

A prominent woman with a high educational level, a key position in the government or private sector, and a high social status will be the best candidates to enter politics and bring women's voices to parliament or the house of representatives. Giving women the same opportunities as men will reduce the gender gap and as a result it will improve toward the quality of women's empowerment.

### **Recommendation**

According to the data presented earlier, men outnumbered women in tertiary education, the workforce, and the government. Nowadays, women's involvement in governance is increasing, especially in the Government Link Company. Besides, they are also involved in policy making where their numbers are increasing in the parliament. For sectors that are dominated by men, they have succeeded in breaking through such as oil and gas and aerospace sectors. In the area of politics in Malaysia, as to the date this paper is written, there are only 22 women Member of Parliaments (MPs) out of 222 MPs. This only represent 14.4%. This scenario arose could be due to the small number of women candidate in the last General Election (GE). There were only 75 women candidates out of 687 (10.9%) total candidate in GE 14 in the last election. In order to increase the women empowerment in the politic arena, the total number of MPs should be increased. This could be implemented if more women being selected as candidate. Political parties could assist by grooming women who is young, educated, and dedicated to serve the public. These are among the criteria that public is looking for in giving vote. Higher number of women MPs means women voices is likely to be heard if there are issues pertaining to women.

If women's empowerment is a national priority, a target/quota should be set to ensure that a certain number of women are permitted to work in specific industries. Campaigns and public awareness should be conducted first in male-dominated industries. A study on the disparity between the number of women in the labor force and the number of women in tertiary education could also be carried out. This is to determine the problems that women face after finishing their studies, as well as the problems that force them to leave the workforce.

### **Conclusion**

For decades, issues and concerns about women's empowerment have been widely debated and discussed in Malaysia, with some progress made in addressing the issues. According to the findings, the quality of women's empowerment in the economic sector and labor force sector appears to be acceptable. Despite the fact that the number of women in the workforce, politics and government, and the economy has yet to reach half of the total workforce but it has been steadily improving and increasing over the years. Not only that, but we discovered that education has reached the pinnacle of women's empowerment in Malaysia, as evidenced by the large number of women enrolled in tertiary education. It demonstrates that women in Malaysia have been given equal learning opportunities as men.

Overall, the quality of women's empowerment in Malaysia is improving. Nonetheless, continuous monitoring, future enhancement, and specific actions could be performed and

implemented in order to ensure that the quality of women empowerment in Malaysia does not deteriorate but rather improves.

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