

Gender Equality and women's empowerment are not just catchphrases — they are words with real weight, about goals critical for our collective wellbeing. There are real lives and real futures at stake.

Dear Chair, delegates, and participants,

I am happy to speak for MALAYSIA in this committee on women's issues.

Malaysia stands by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

It aims to achieve high-income status by 2020, but cannot do this without women being equal partners and drivers of growth and prosperity for all citizens. Its most recent budget made upholding the role of women a core strategy, and it aims to boost the female labour participation rate from 54 per cent as of last year to 59 per cent by 2020. By 2016, all Malaysian public companies will be required to disclose their level of gender diversity in their annual reports. Since single mothers and female-headed households are often socially and economically disadvantaged, particularly in rural areas, Malaysia has developed a national action plan to empower them. Speaking at the Global Leaders' Meeting on 27 September 2015, Prime Minister Najib Razak said: "We aim to achieve high-income nation status by 2020. But we cannot do this without women being equal partners, and we need them to be drivers of growth – growth that will bring prosperity to all our citizens."

By encouraging women to venture into entrepreneurship and providing them with the necessary tools and support, Malaysia aims to create an enabling environment where women can thrive economically and achieve greater autonomy.

Since 2011, there's been a steady push to get more women into leadership roles within organisations, a key part of gender equality efforts.

Malaysia has set a goal of having 30% of top management positions filled by women. Despite ongoing efforts over the past decade, there's still a noticeable gap in getting women into these top roles in the private sector.

This issue is highlighted in annual budget speeches, emphasising the need to address Unfortunatly, with limited economic power, it is often women who are most vulnerable to disasters and change. We witnessed this firsthand when the pandemic led to increasing cases of physical and economic violence against women, rampant poverty — especially in female headed households — and the increase in female Unpaid Care Work burdens.the imbalance and ensure women have fair opportunities to lead.

This year's official theme is "Investing in Women: Accelerating Progress", calling on governments, corporations and ordinary citizens everywhere to invest in the economic empowerment of women.

We are at a critical juncture in history, and investing in our women is more urgent than ever

What Malaysia stands to gain

Women make up 50 per cent of Malaysia's population, yet we have one of the lowest Female Labour Force Participation Rates (FLFPR) amongst Upper Middle Income Countries.

Only 55.8 per cent of Malaysian women participate in the labour force, compared to 81.9 per cent of men. With only a little over half the female population engaged in the labour force, we are losing out on so much untapped potential.

Research has shown that Malaysia stands to grow its income per capita by 26.2 per cent if all economic barriers are removed for women. This translates into an average income gain of about RM9400 (US\$2,250) — a considerable amount.

The simple truth is that when women work, economies grow. Investing in our women means investing in us all.

Furthermore, when women have equal access to economic resources and opportunity, there are not only positive economic effects, there are also positive multiplier impacts on the wellbeing of society as a whole.

When women have financial agency, they are able to engage meaningfully in public life, for example by entering policymaking roles (because at the end of the day, women need money to run for elections). Research has shown that when more women are empowered as economic and political actors, our policies are more reflective of the diverse needs on the ground.

Ways forward

There are several ways Malaysia can economically empower women, and they involve addressing the structural, social and cultural barriers that restrict women's economic opportunities.

Ensuring full access to Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) is essential to economic empowerment. When both men and women have access to Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) and reproductive health services, including contraceptives for family planning, women will have better control over the timing and spacing of their own births. They will be able to plan their careers better and reduce career gaps, which is one of the main factors driving the persistent Gender Pay Gap.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DoSM) latest figures, women currently make 33 per cent less than men a year, a staggering jump from the 3.5 per cent difference recorded for the year before.

Ensuring SRHR and expanding education is also key to addressing unintended adolescent pregnancy in Malaysia, which is a significant disruptor to female educational attainment and economic opportunity.

A joint report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Unicef on adolescent pregnancy in Malaysia highlights the need for CSE so girls are able to make better informed decisions about their reproductive health, alongside introducing educational programmes for both boys and girls that cover issues of consent, harmful gender norms and violence.

Instating equal Parental Leave for both men and women also keeps more women in the workforce by reducing career gaps and fostering healthier, more equal gender dynamics for Unpaid Care Work at home.

Currently, men in Malaysia only have 7 days of paternity leave as compared to 98 days for women around the country, which places the burden of caregiving post-birth on women. This mismatch in maternity and paternity leaves also leaves women vulnerable to discrimination in job seeking, which once again limits their economic opportunities and agency.

With that said, it is important that reforms in parental leave apply to all states in Malaysia so no one group is left behind — currently Sabah and Sarawak have still not mandated the minimum 7 days of paternity leave. Sabah and Sarawak have FLFPRS of 49 per cent and 51.2 per cent respectively, both significantly below the national average of 55.8 per cent.

Furthermore, establishing The Care Economy in Malaysia also has the potential to further the economic might of women. We applaud the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development for committing to investing in The Care Economy, recognising its potential to contribute between 10-39 per cent of our national GDP, and look forward to supporting continued progress in formalising our national care economy framework.

In fact, latest research by the World Bank titled “Filling the Gaps: Childcare Laws for Women’s Economic Empowerment” (based on data from 80 countries spanning a 20-year period — 2000-2020) showed that the enactment of childcare laws increases women’s labour force participation with 2-4 per cent increases within the first 5 years of its enactment.

However, for all the above to come to fruition — it is vital for the Ministry of Economy to have a bigger and more proactive stakeholdership. For without an economic roadmap and in-depth understanding of the socio-economic barriers withholding women’s potential — the resources and investments needed to build the necessary inclusive infrastructures will never tangibly materialise and in tandem withholding Malaysia from achieving the 2030 SDGs.

MWGF is an annual event that brings together multiple stakeholders involved in the social and economic advancement of women and girls in Malaysia. The forum identifies, engages and tracks key social, economic and legislative changes that are needed to accelerate the rights and well-being of Malaysia’s women and girls.