

MALAYSIAN WOMEN IN WORKFORCE:

CHARTING A PATH TO
INCLUSIVE EMPLOYMENT



SERI
SOCIAL & ECONOMIC
RESEARCH INITIATIVE

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PART 1

“WHAT DROVE ME WAS REALISATION AND AWARENESS OF THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN. THEY WERE AS QUALIFIED AND EDUCATED BUT DID NOT HAVE AN EQUAL POSITION. I COULD NOT IGNORE THE ISSUE AND HAD TO FIGHT FOR THE CAUSE. THE PUSH TO DO THIS HAS TO COME FROM YOU.”

Tun Fatimah Hashim
Malaysia's first female Cabinet Minister



Despite the fact that more than 60 percent of graduates in Malaysia are women, less than 50 per cent of them are employed¹. The female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) is a critical determinant affecting the Malaysian economy and has repercussions of leaving women out of the formal economy. In 2023, Malaysian women's labour force participation rate (LFPR) was at 55.8 percent per cent compared to 81.9 per cent for men². It has been projected that raising the employment level of women in Malaysia by 30 per cent could raise GDP between 7 per cent to 12 per cent³. However, there are challenges in optimising women's participation in the labour market.

Gender inequality negatively impacts women's career prospects. To demonstrate, although Malaysian women make up 53.2 percent of STEM graduates in 2021, more male graduates are employed in the sector than women⁴.

Some employers prefer to hire men rather than women to mitigate costs associated with maternity leave, which proves the existence of gender discrimination in employment⁵. A recent survey conducted among 761 respondents revealed that 41.3 percent of employers believe that extending maternity leave, as mandated by the Employment Act (from 60 to 98 days), would diminish women's employability. The prevailing negative perception of maternity leave not only has adverse effects on FLFP rate but also presents broader challenges to productivity, socio-economic development, and, consequently, national growth.

Gender norms, entrenched in societal expectations and stereotypes, serve to perpetuate inequality in various ways. For instance, traditional expectations often dictate that women assume the primary responsibility for caregiving and domestic chores. Women's care work remains unpaid, invisible, and unaccounted for in national accounts, and serves as a structural barrier to their entry into the formal workforce in large numbers. In 2018, the Malaysian government initiated a programme where single mothers or wives of household heads below the age of 55 years old who contribute a minimum of MYR5 per month to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) would get MYR480 annually deposited in their accounts, representing a noteworthy effort to acknowledge and integrate care work into the economic framework. However, the measures are still inadequate given the persistently low number of women in the labour force.

Additionally, there is an existing wage gap between male and female workers in Malaysia. In 2021, the mean monthly wage was MYR2,968 for

¹ Khazanah Research Institute, "The State of Households 2018: Different Realities" (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute, License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0, 2018)

² Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2023," 2023.

³ Allen Ng and Teoh Jia Chern, "A Modern Malaysia Needs a More Gender Inclusive Economy", Khazanah Research Institute, 2018.

⁴ Rachel Gong, "Malaysia's Gender Gap in STEM Education and Employment," Khazanah Research Institute, 2023.

women, or 4 per cent lower compared to men⁶. However, the gap is more pronounced in higher managerial positions where women are paid 14 percent less than their male counterparts with the same qualifications. These challenges in promoting women's participation in the labour market highlight the need for policy interventions and cultural shifts that will support women's access to employment opportunities.

This report attempts to dive into some of these issues in order to better understand the disparity between the high rate of female graduation and low employment rate. Conducting a survey aimed at Malaysian women holding a university degree who are actively participating in the labour market, we sought to understand Malaysian women's experiences in pursuing employment within the Malaysian context. Paying particular attention to the stressors and expectations unique to women, encompassing university to work transition, career delays and mismatches, and representation in the workplace, this report presents three key themes, summarised as follows:



A key challenge of this study was to find a balance between advocating for more economic justice and participation for women, while acknowledging and embracing the importance of family for the majority of Malaysian women, as illustrated by our survey results. In doing so, we hope to shift the policy lens of women empowerment in the labour market; a change that would allow women and men to pursue being empowered both in the public and private realm of family and work.

This report is structured into two parts. Part I covers the introduction, literature review, research methodology and results. **Part II delves into the results' discussion, presents recommendations and concludes the paper.**

LITERATURE REVIEW



“WE ARE NOT
HERE ONLY TO
DEMOLISH
DISCRIMINATION
BUT TO
ENVISION THE
BENEFITS OF
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HUMANITY IN
DEVELOPMENT”

Sirimavo Bandaranaike
The World's First female Prime Minister

FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION AND GENDER EQUALITY

Elevating the number of women in the workforce plays a pivotal role in advancing the cause of gender equality. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), labour force participation rate (LFPR) indicates the size of the working-age population of a nation that engages in the labour market either by working or seeking for work⁷. The labour force participation rate is a significant indicator that divides the labour force into gender and age group to show the distribution landscape of a nation's labour force. The World Bank defines female labour participation rate (FLFPR) as the percentage of women active in the labour force⁸.

The world is witnessing a persistent disparity between men and women in employment. The global labour force participation rate for women is 47 percent while it is 72 percent for men. Another study by ILO-UN Women which examined 84 countries also indicates a general higher participation rate in the labour force of males in all regions than females. This distinction between the labour force participation rates of men and women reveals a gender gap in the labour market which is typically influenced by gendered social expectations and traditional gender roles.

Countries with more working women are more likely to have a lower rate of occupational gender segregation, which ensures that tasks in society are more equally divided.¹¹ Moreover, tackling the gender gap in the labour force is significant to ensure that all citizens have the freedom to work regardless of their social background.¹² This pursuit aligns with the fundamental principle that every citizen should have the freedom to engage in meaningful work without encountering discriminatory barriers.

Economically, the impact of narrowing the gender gap is staggering. Projections indicate that a 25 percent reduction in the gender gap could lead to a remarkable USD 5.8 trillion increase in global GDP by the year 2025¹³. This underscores the untapped economic potential that lies in empowering and leveraging the talents of women in the workforce.¹⁴ Consequently, closing the gender gap not only fosters societal equity but also emerges as a key driver for substantial economic growth on a global scale. To gain insight into the issue of gender inequality in the Malaysian labour force, it is essential to comprehend the present status of women in the Malaysian workforce.

⁷ International Labour Organization, 'Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM)', https://www.ilo.org/Wcmsp5/Groups/Public/---Dgre-ports/---Stat/Documents/Publication/Wcms_422090.Pdf, 2015.

⁸ The World Bank, 'Glossary | DataBank', Worldbank.org, 2015.

⁹ International Labour Organization, 'The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?', ilo.org, 2017.

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, 'Having Kids Sets Back Women's Labour Force Participation More so than Getting Married - ILOSTAT', ILOSTAT, March 3, 2020.

¹¹ Liza Reisel, 'The Equality Hurdle: Resolving the Welfare State Paradox - Erling Barth, Liza Reisel, Kjersti Misje Østbakken, 2023', *Work, Employment and Society*, 2023.

¹² International Labour Organization, 'The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?', ilo.org, 2017.

¹³ International Labour Organization, (Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM) 2015)

B. BACKGROUND OF MALAYSIA'S FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION

Over the past few decades, Malaysia has experienced a gradual increase in its FLFPR. A study on labour force participation of women in Malaysia showed that in the shift from 1995 to 2000, women's FLFPR increased from 43.5 per cent to 44.5 per cent.¹⁵ Meanwhile, men's FLFPR increased from 85.3 per cent to 85.4 percent. Evidently, this demonstrates that the female labour force in Malaysia has risen but remained lower than men. Women's labour force participation rate stands at 55.8 percent in 2023, according to data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM).¹⁶ Despite Malaysia's status as one of ASEAN's more developed economies, its FLFPR remains among the lowest in the region, a disparity that becomes more pronounced on the international stage as Malaysia ranks 97th.¹⁷ In contrast to other East Asian countries, Malaysia's FLFPR is prominently characterised by a "single peak" whereby women are not re-entering the workforce after their initial departure.

This means that participation rates are higher when women are young before declining after reaching the "peak".¹⁸ There are various socio-economic contributors affecting the women's labour force participation rate. Among them are age, education attainment, marriage, number of children, and presence of parents.¹⁹

C. WOMEN AND CARE WORK

Firstly, with the increase of age, there is a noticeable decline in women's labour force participation rate.

This shows that many women in Malaysia, as they age are prone to exit the labour market, potentially due to marriage or childcare responsibilities as they progress on the trajectory of traditional womanhood.

Indeed, marriage marks a significant life event for many women. Salleh and Mansor estimated that married Malaysian women were 29.7 percent more likely to exit the labour force compared to their single counterparts.²⁰ The social role theory explains that traditional gender norms constructed men as primary breadwinners and women as confined to domestic and caregiving roles.²¹ Therefore, one of the reasons for women leaving the workforce revolve around childcare responsibilities and the stability of

¹⁴ International Labour Organization, *The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?*, 2017

¹⁵ Nor Aznin Abu Bakar and Norehan Abdullah, "Labour Force Participation of Women in Malaysia," *Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial*, September 9, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.32890/jps.13.2010.11341>.

¹⁶ Department of Statistics Malaysia, "Statistics on Women Empowerment in Selected Domains, Malaysia, 2023," 2023.

¹⁷ Khazanah Research Institute, "Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey" (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute, 2019)

¹⁸ Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia," *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)* 7, no. 7 (July 28, 2022): e001641, <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i7.1641>.

¹⁹ Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia, 2022"

²⁰ Sharifah Nabilah Syed Salleh and Norma Mansor, "Women and Labour Force Participation in Malaysia,"

²¹ Noorlizawati Abd Rahim et al., "Women's Dual Roles and Career Growth: A Preliminary Study of Malaysian Female Talents in Science..." ResearchGate (IOP Publishing, February 2019).

of their husband's income, with some even obliging to exit upon their spouse's request.²² Moreover, there is a greater pressure for women to reduce working hours, take career breaks or abandon their careers because it is deemed their responsibility to provide physical and emotional care for their family, especially in a situation of limited childcare options or inflexible working hours.²³ According to Bloom et al.²⁴ the impact of this dynamic is substantial, as for each child a woman bears, she potentially sacrifices approximately two years of active participation in the labour force. This challenge is further compounded by the escalating demand for care work placed on women due to the demographic shift towards an ageing population, implying that the aforementioned loss in labour force participation may intensify.

D. GAP BETWEEN WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

There is a strong positive link between education and women's labour participation which is consistent with the findings of several studies. However, it is observed that a conflict between female education level and female labour force participation rate is present in the context of Malaysia. The lower secondary completion rate stands at 89 percent for girls and 85.2 percent for boys, while 40 percent of the women in the labour force hold a tertiary education certificate compared to 23 percent of the men.²⁵

As explained by De Beni, the UNFPA Asia & Pacific Regional Office Health Economist, the gap between women's high education level and low employment rate could be explained by the presence of adolescent pregnancies at the age group of 10 to 19.²⁶ Teenage pregnancy consequently leads to school dropouts and thus, hampering formal education progress. Additionally, he mentioned that although women possess a higher education level than men in Malaysia, women are more susceptible to the inevitable depreciation of value as a human capital. Pregnancies and childcare duties which cause the "double-burden syndrome" borne by women diminish their time in the workforce and reduce their opportunities for career advancements and experience accumulation, which results in the "single peak" scenario.

²² Roslilee Ab Halim, Nadia Abd. and Mawarti Samsudin, "Malaysian Female Graduates: Marriage, Motherhood and Labour Force Participation," ResearchGate (unknown, 2016).

²³ Noorlizawati Abd Rahim et al., "Women's Dual Roles and Career Growth: A Preliminary Study of Malaysian Female Talents in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET)" *Journal of Physics*, February 1, 2019. .

²⁴ David E Bloom et al., "Fertility, Female Labor Force Participation, and the Demographic Dividend," *Journal of Economic Growth* 14, no. 2 (May 5, 2009) 79-101. .

²⁵ Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, "Statistics on Women, Family and Community: 2020 - 2021," 2021.

²⁶ Ming Teoh, "Expanding Women's Economic Rights Is Good for the Nation," *The Star*, 2023. .

E. DISCRIMINATORY HIRING PRACTICES AND PERCEPTIONS

Finally, discriminatory hiring practices and perceptions also affect women's labour force participation rate. While previous literature has often attributed female graduate unemployment to the prevalence of non-STEM degrees among women, recent trends paint a different picture. In 2021, women constituted 53.2 percent of STEM graduates from local tertiary institutions, yet the hiring rates for male graduates remain disproportionately higher.²⁷ This has led to suggestions that employers prefer hiring males over females. A recent survey has revealed that 41.3 percent of 761 respondents expressed the belief that an extended maternity leave, as stipulated by the Employment Act (from 60 to 98 days), would reduce women's employability.²⁸ Anecdotal evidence attests to the notion that some employers opt for male hires to mitigate perceived costs associated with maternity leave.²⁹

This perception of maternity not only detrimentally impacts Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP) but also poses broader challenges to productivity, socio-economic development, and, consequently, national growth, as emphasised by Gong.³⁰ By perpetuating a mindset that associates maternity with hindrances to workplace participation, society risks overlooking the invaluable contributions that women make to care work. Women bear the lion's share of this essential workload, encompassing nurturing, caregiving, and maintaining the fabric of social cohesion.

Employers have demonstrated a preference for hiring male candidates on account of fears that women will eventually leave to start their own families.³¹ Indeed, women in STEM suffer from a "leaky pipeline syndrome" sporting the highest labour force exit rates compared to other professions, attributed in part to prolonged working hours that exacerbate the challenges of the 'double burden syndrome'.³² With a future dominated by STEM and technology, STEM female graduates could be on the losing end should hiring practices remain discriminatory, institutional challenges unaddressed and cultural expectations unchanged.

²⁷ Rachel Gong, (Malaysia's Gender Gap in Stem Education and Employment, 2023)

²⁸ Dexter Tilo, "How Is Malaysia's Expanded Maternity Leave Affecting Employers?," Hcamag.com (HRD Asia, February 24, 2023).

²⁹ Bernama, "The Economy Is Back on Track but Women's Presence in Workforce Is Not," Bernama, August 7, 2022.

³⁰ Gong, (Malaysia's Gender Gap in Stem Education and Employment, 2023

³¹ Bernama, "The Economy Is Back on Track but Women's Presence in Workforce Is Not," Bernama, August 7, 2022. .

³² Noorlizawati Abd Rahim et al., "Women's Dual Roles and Career Growth: A Preliminary Study of Malaysian Female Talents in Science, Engineering and Technology (SET)" Journal of Physics, February 1, 2019. .



A. SURVEY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

This research employed a survey-based methodology facilitated by a Malaysian based market research platform, leveraging a curated set of questions derived from reviews of existing literature that was researched by SERI analysts. The survey instrument was designed to address key inquiries identified during the literature review process. By employing the expertise of Vase.ai, we ensured a systematic approach to gathering data that aligned with our research objectives.

B. SAMPLE SELECTION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 400 female graduates from diverse backgrounds across Malaysia constituted the study's sample. This selection encompassed graduates from both private and public universities, providing a comprehensive representation of the country's educational and employment landscape. Drawing from the Vase.ai pool of participants ensured a varied demographic composition, crucial for capturing a range of perspectives and experiences among female graduates transitioning into the workforce.

The data collection phase spanned a two-week period, chosen to optimise response rates. This duration facilitated a robust collection of responses from the targeted cohort, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of factors influencing the delay in female graduates' entry into the workforce.

C. VARIABLES AND MEASUREMENTS

Variables in this research encompassed both dependent and independent elements. The dependent variable primarily focused on the timing of female graduates' integration into the workforce. Independent variables included aspects such as educational background (including degree type and field of study), career aspirations, and perceived societal expectations. Measurements involved a combination of quantitative assessments, including Likert scale responses and numerical evaluations, as well as qualitative insights gathered from open-ended responses to offer a nuanced understanding of individual experiences.

D. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis strategy adopted for this study included both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis entailed employing statistical tools such as regression analysis and correlation to discern relationships among variables. Simultaneously, qualitative analysis involved thematic examination to uncover underlying patterns and themes within the qualitative data.

E. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & LIMITATIONS

Stringent measures were implemented to safeguard participant confidentiality and anonymity, while informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to their participation. Additionally, the study acknowledged potential limitations in its design and execution. One of them is related to sample size, which would affect the generalizability of the survey results. Additionally, the study was attuned to the inherent biases that may exist in survey construction, self-reported data from respondents and data analysis. This acknowledgment served to provide a nuanced interpretation of the findings and underscored the importance of considering these factors in the analysis and interpretation of results.

**“WE CAN BE
ENTIRELY HUMAN
WITHOUT CEASING
TO BE A COMPLETE
WOMAN”**

Raden Adjeng Kartini
Indonesian Women's Rights Advocate

The results section provides a brief explanation of data analysis obtained from the survey. It starts with a demographic overview of the sample population. It is then structured according to one's career trajectory, namely the education phase, the job-seeking period and the period when one is actively involved in the labour force. Finally, we include a section to discuss the ethnic influence in women's career trajectory.

A. DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF THE SURVEY SAMPLE

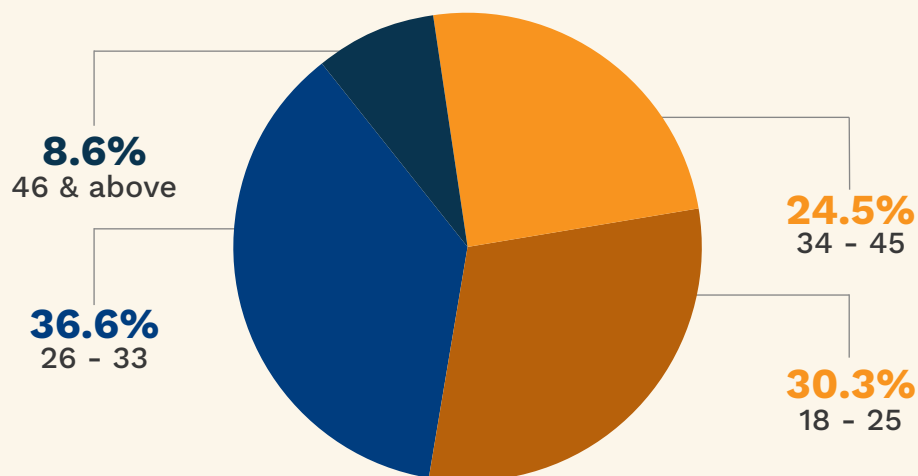


Figure 1. Distribution of Ages Among Survey Respondents

The data reveals a diverse age distribution among women in the workforce according to the survey. Approximately 30.3 percent of the surveyed women are in the 18-25 age group, while the majority, comprising 36.6 percent, falls within the 26-33 age range. The 34-45 age group constitutes 24.5 percent of the surveyed women. Additionally, women aged 46 and above make up 8.6 percent of the surveyed workforce.

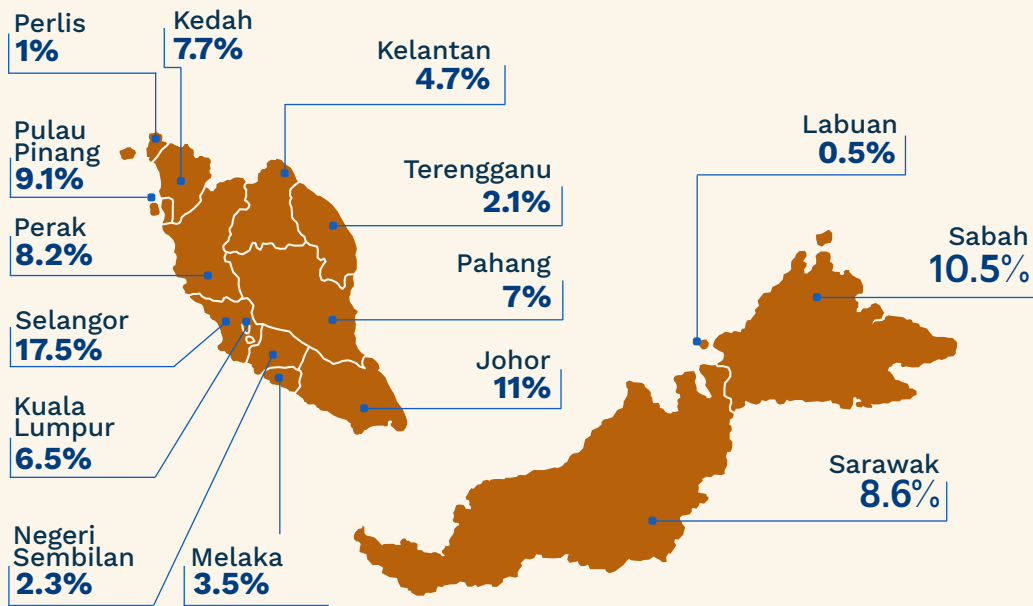


Figure 2. Distribution of States Among Respondents

This survey includes participants from all states, with the majority of the respondents from Selangor (17.5 percent), Johor (11 percent) and Sabah (10.5 percent).

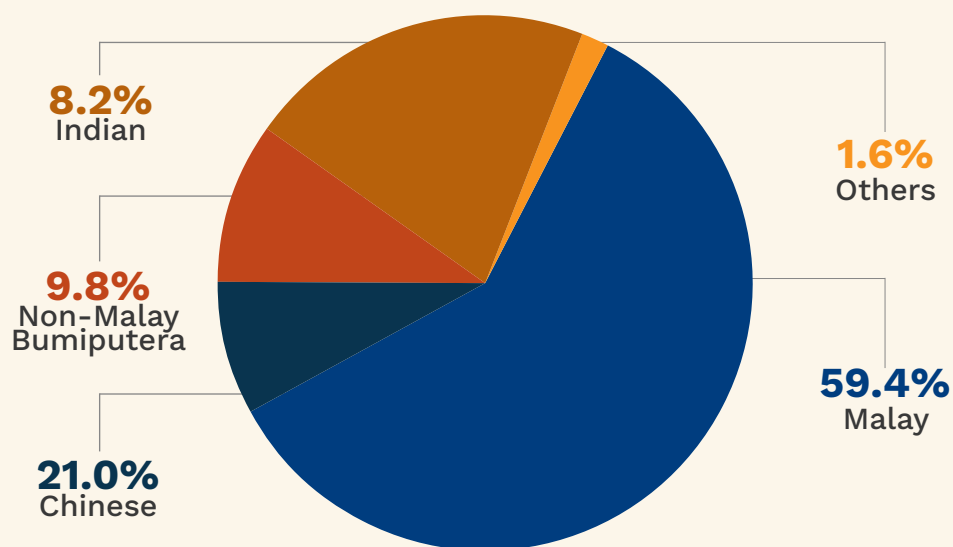
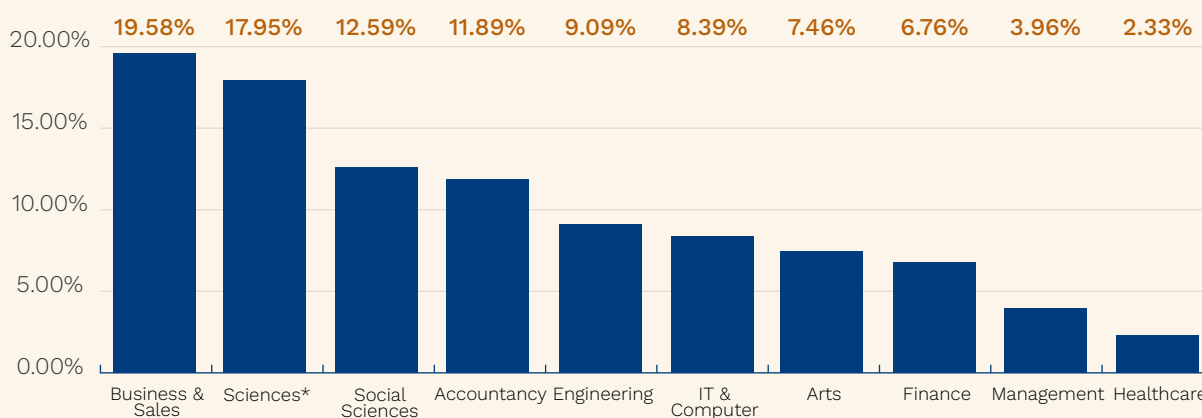


Figure 3. Distribution of Ethnicity Among Respondents

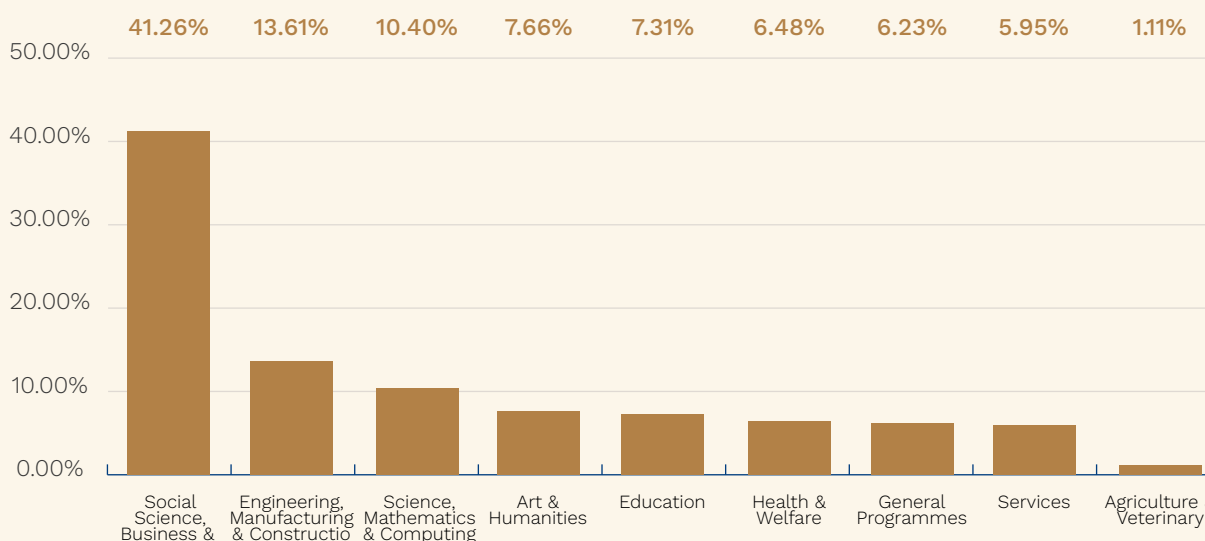
The survey provides an overview of the ethnic composition in Malaysia, where Malays (59.4 percent) constitute the largest segment of the surveyed population, followed by Chinese (21 percent), Indian (8.2 percent), and non-Malay Bumiputera in East Malaysia (9.8 percent). Additionally, the survey includes data on foreigners residing in the country.

B. PHASE 1: EDUCATION



Degree Background

Figure 4. Respondents' Degree Background



Field of Studies

Figure 5. Number of Students' Intake, Enrolment and Output by Field of Studies in HEIs for Year 2022, Department of Statistics Malaysia. 2022

The survey finds that most respondents studied in courses related to Business and Sales, followed by Sciences* (Biology, Environment, Chemistry, Sports Science, Food Science, Statistics, Actuarial etc).³³ Social Sciences (Education, Mass Communication, Linguistics, Religious Studies), takes the third place, followed closely by Accountancy. The remaining courses are Engineering, IT & Computer Science, Arts, Finance, Arts, Finance, Management, and Healthcare. The data aligns with the statistics on female students' field of study by the Department of Statistics Malaysia. On a national level, a majority of female students have Social sciences, Business and Law background. This is followed by Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction and Science, Mathematics and Computing. This correlation underscores a broader consistency in academic preferences among female students at both the surveyed level and the national scale.

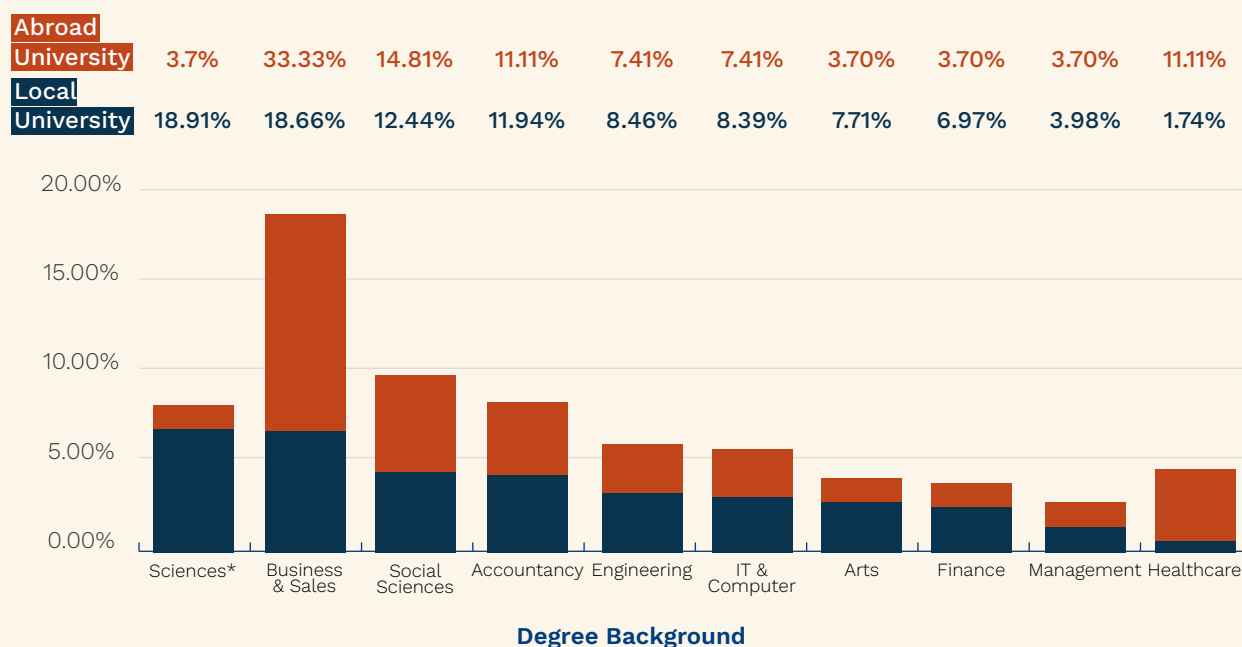


Figure 6. Respondents' Study Locations, Local vs. Abroad, Categorized by Degree Background

The studies also show that respondents who attend local universities are more likely to study courses related to Sciences* (18.91 percent) and Business and Sales (18.66 percent), while those who study abroad mostly study courses related to Business and Sales, at 33.33 percent. Comparatively, those who study Sciences* abroad only amount to 3.7 percent.

³³ We grouped STEM courses that are not engineering and IT related such as Biology, Environment, Chemistry, Sports Science, Food science, statistics, and actuarial science into Sciences*

C. PHASE 2: JOB SEEKING

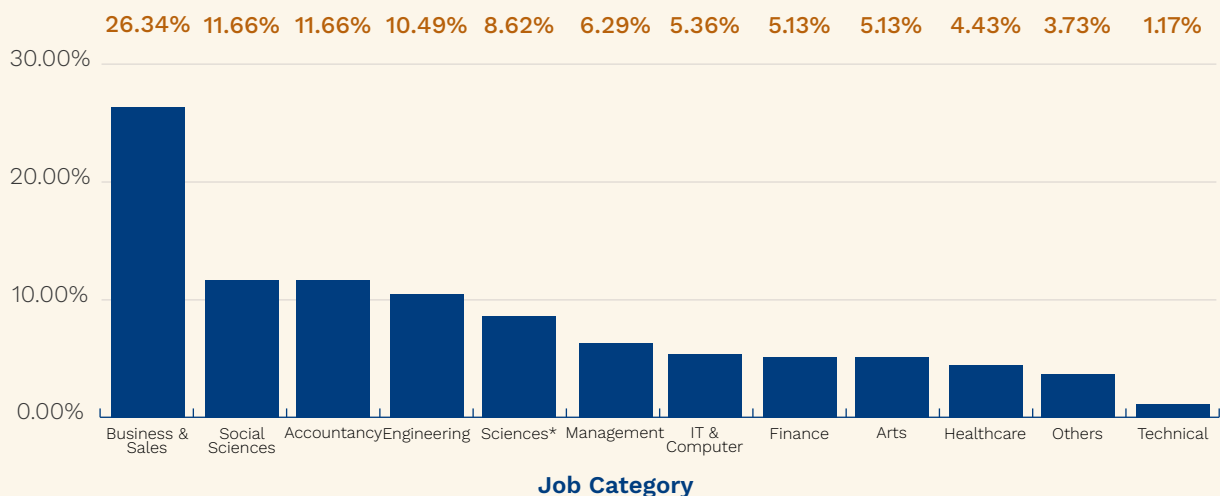


Figure 7. Respondents' First Job Across Sectors

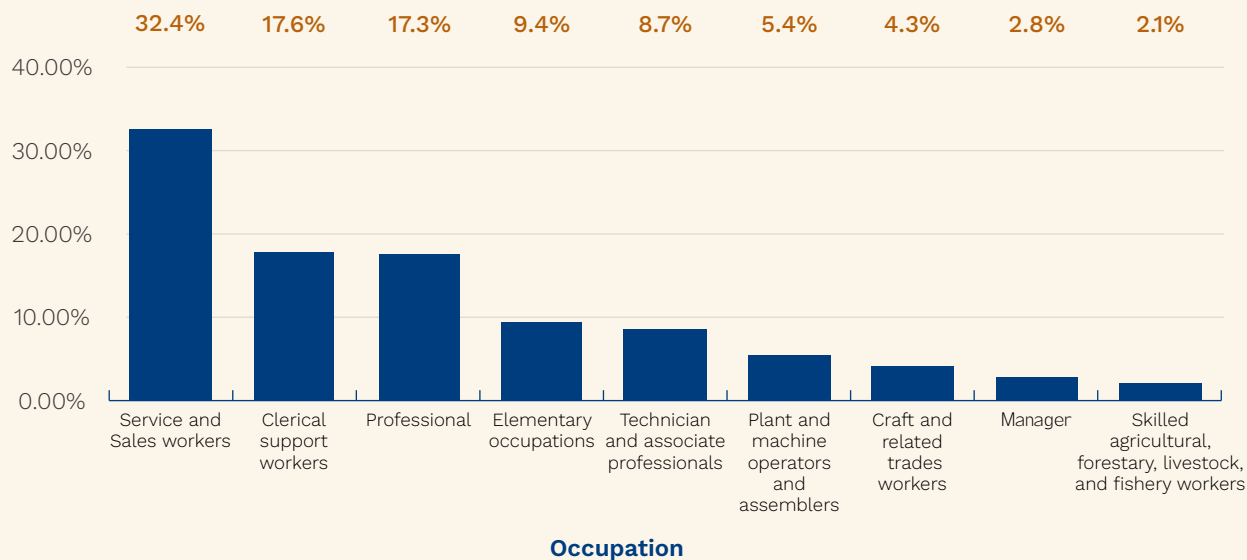


Figure 8. Percentage of Female Employment by occupation in 2021, Department of Statistics Malaysia

Most respondents landed their first job in Business and Sales (26.34 percent). It is worth noting however that we grouped individuals employed in the Food and Beverage (F&B) and retail services sectors under the category of Business & Sales due to the relatively low number of respondents in these specific fields. This consolidation was necessary to ensure meaningful statistical analysis and accurate representation across diverse employment sectors. There were similar numbers of respondents who worked in Social Sciences and Accountancy jobs at 11.66 percent, respectively.

Upon comparing our data with the statistics from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), it is evident that the leading sectors for women include Service and Sales, Clerical support workers, and Professionals. Notably, the alignment of those engaged in Service and Sales with the broader category of Business and Sales in our data further corroborates the consistency at the national level.

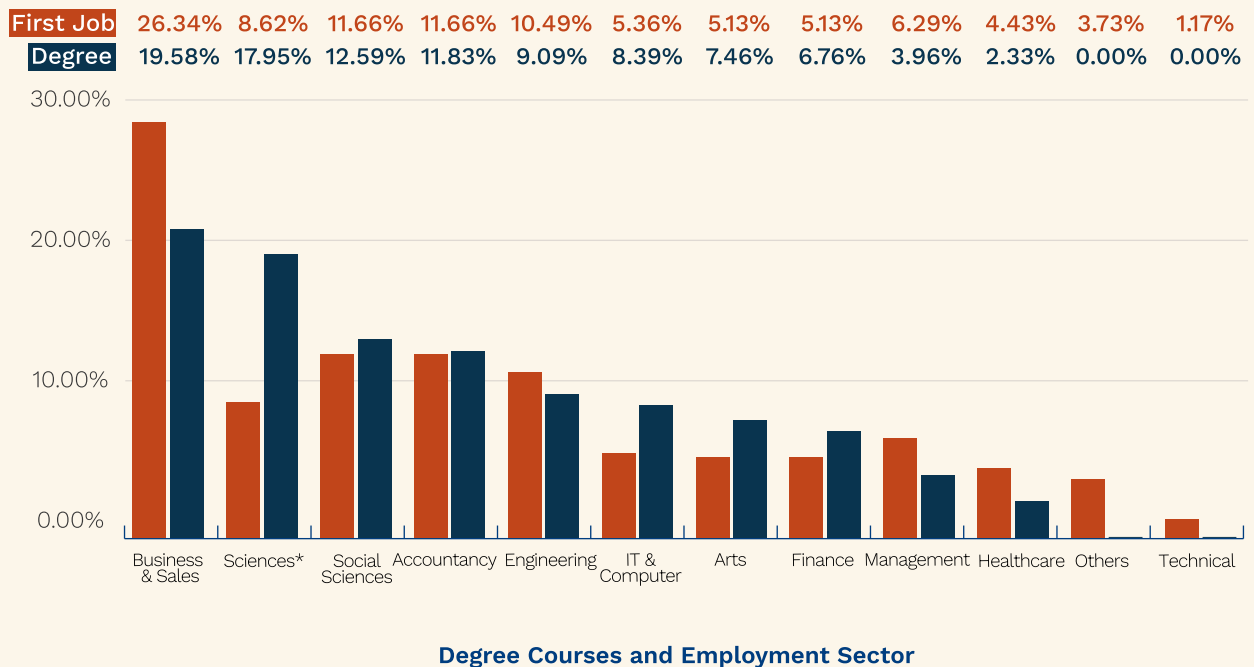


Figure 9. Comparison Between Respondents' Degrees and their Employment Sectors

Figure 9. compares the percentage of respondents in a degree field and the field of their first job to analyse the correlation between one's field of study and first job. Notably, a higher proportion of women find themselves employed in the Business and Sales sector compared to the specific courses they pursued. Conversely, almost half of individuals who pursued courses in the Sciences stream are not employed within the field.

Interestingly, those with backgrounds in Social Sciences, Accountancy, and Engineering courses appear to encounter less difficulty in aligning their academic qualifications with their job placements.

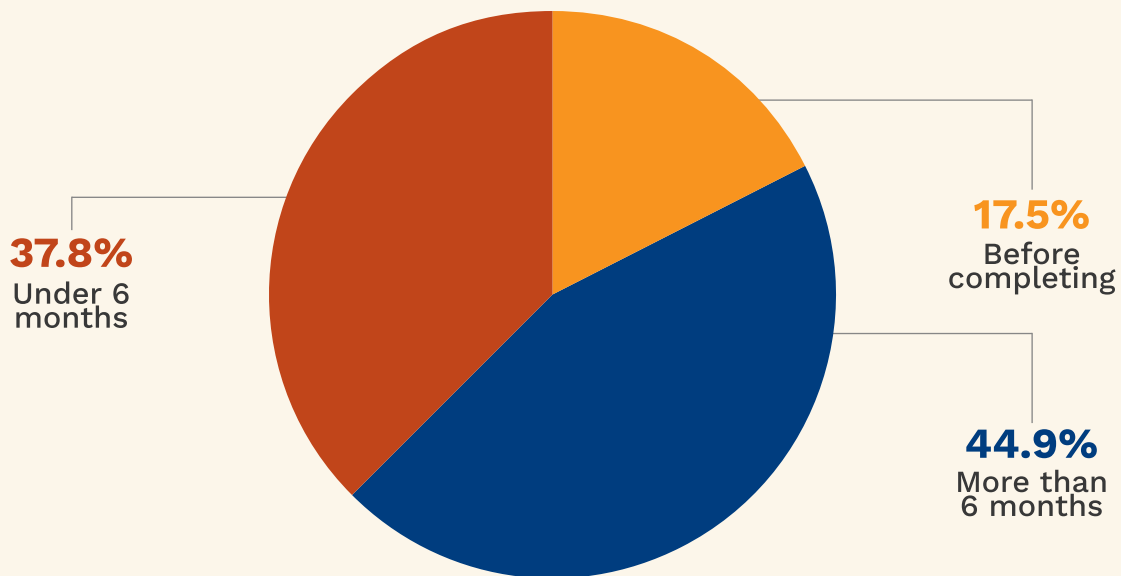


Figure 10. Respondents' Job Acquisition Timeline

Figure 10. shows that 17.5 percent of respondents secured a job before graduating, 37.8 percent of respondents found a job within 6 months of graduating and 44.8 percent of respondents took more than 6 months to find a job.

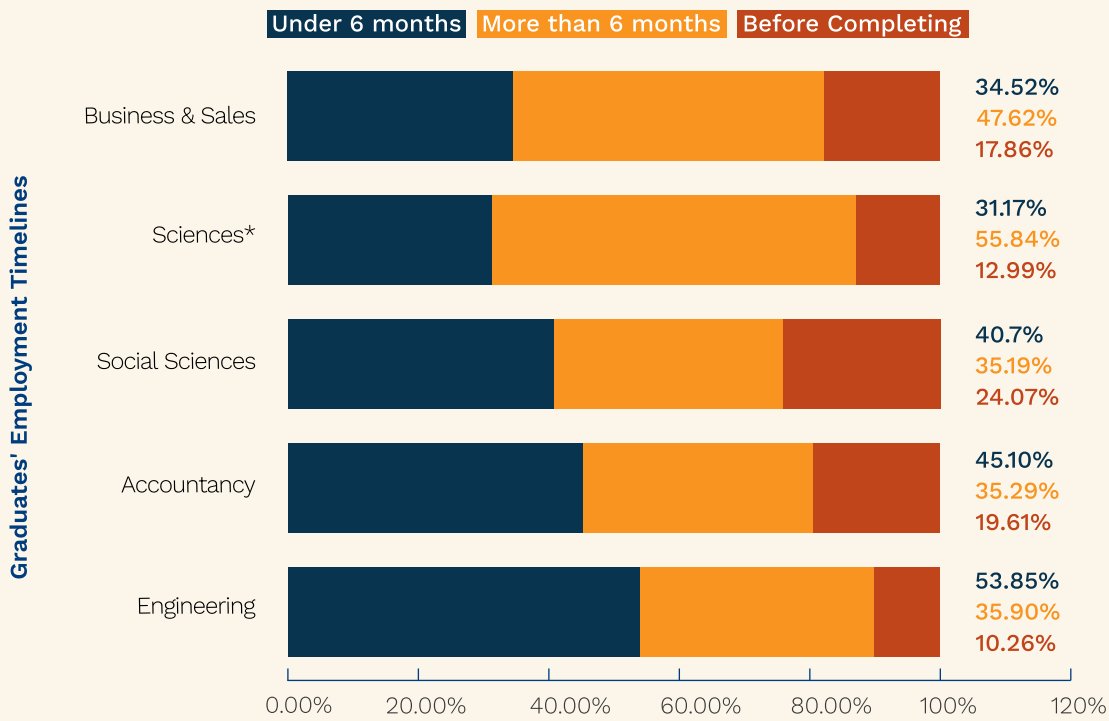


Figure 11. Comparison of Graduates' Employment Timelines Across Various Degree Programs

The study finds that women who studied Sciences* related courses took the longest time to find a job with 55.84 percent taking more than 6 months. On the other hand, social science, accountancy and engineering graduates took less time to find a job.

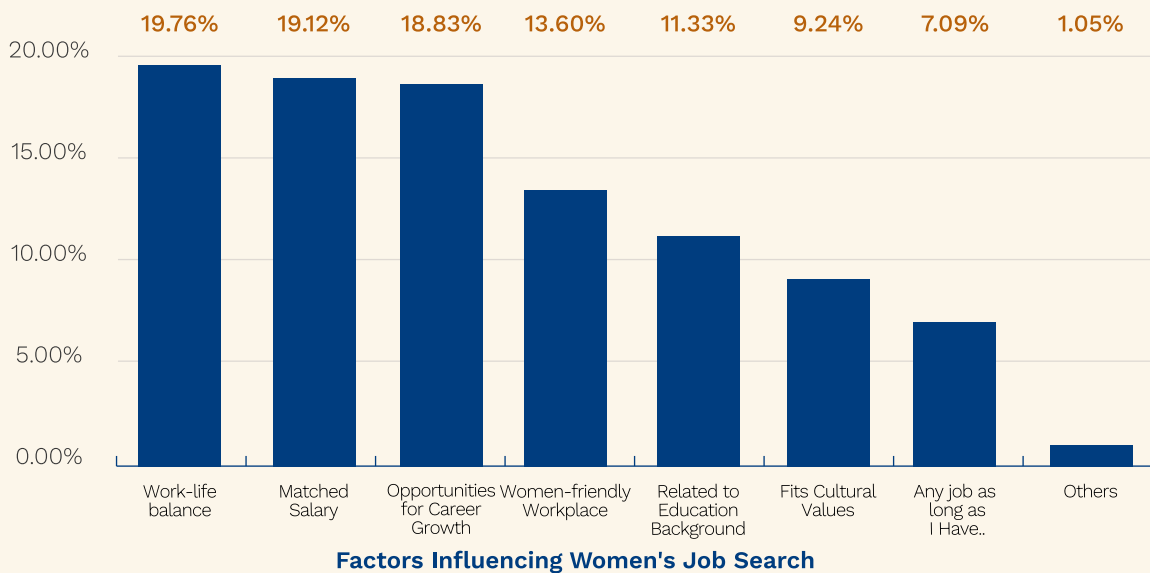


Figure 12. Factors Influencing Women's Job Search and Selection Process

Respondents prioritised work-life balance the most (19.76 percent), followed by salary satisfaction (19.12 percent) and career advancement opportunities (18.83 percent).

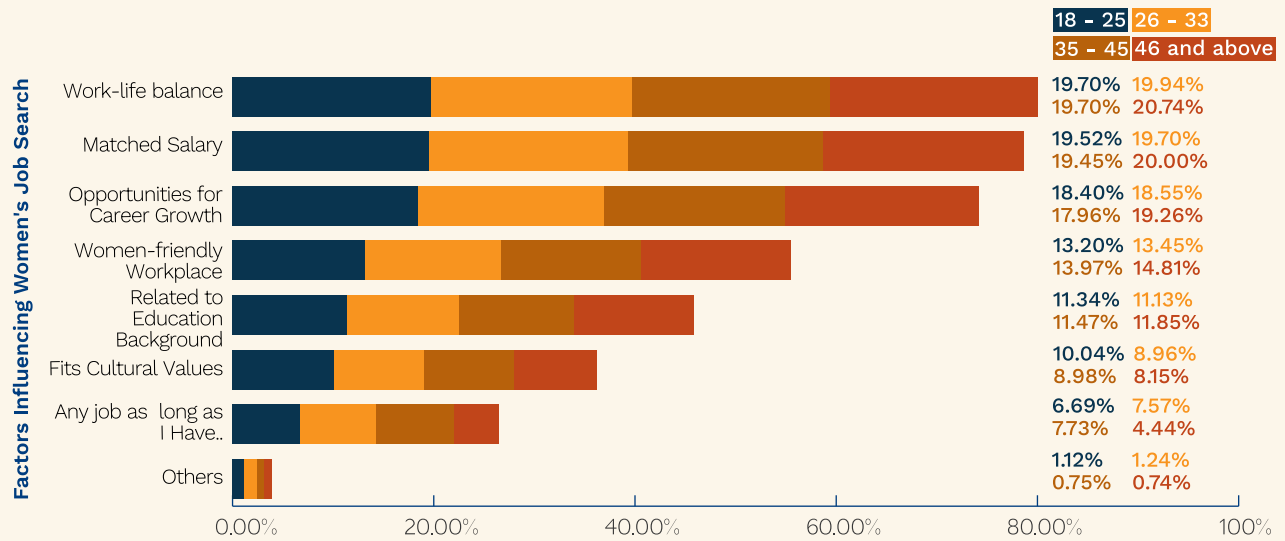


Figure 13. Factors Influencing Women’s Job Search and Selection Process Across Age Groups

Among the respondents, it's noteworthy that all female participants, except those at the age group of 46 years and above, prioritise work-life balance as their primary consideration when seeking employment. This divergence in perspective indicates a potential generational gap, highlighting varying priorities and expectations regarding job factors across different age groups.

D. PHASE 3: IN THE WORKFORCE

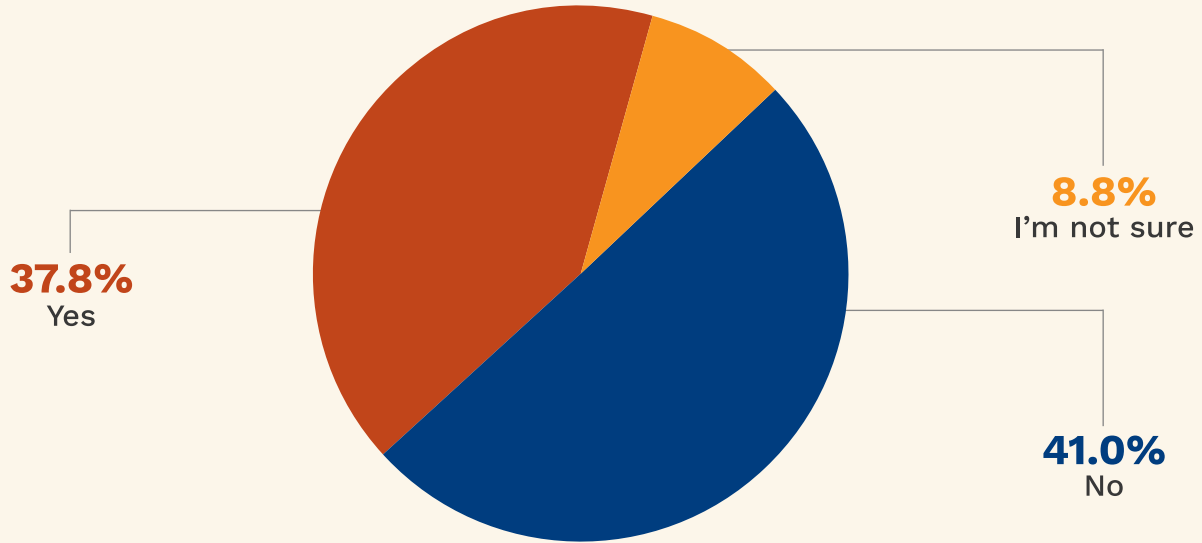


Figure 14. Respondents' Perceptions of the Alignment Between Their First Job and Career Goals

Fifty percent of female graduates indicated that their first job aligned with their career goals, while 41 percent reported it did not, and 8.8 percent remained uncertain about the alignment.

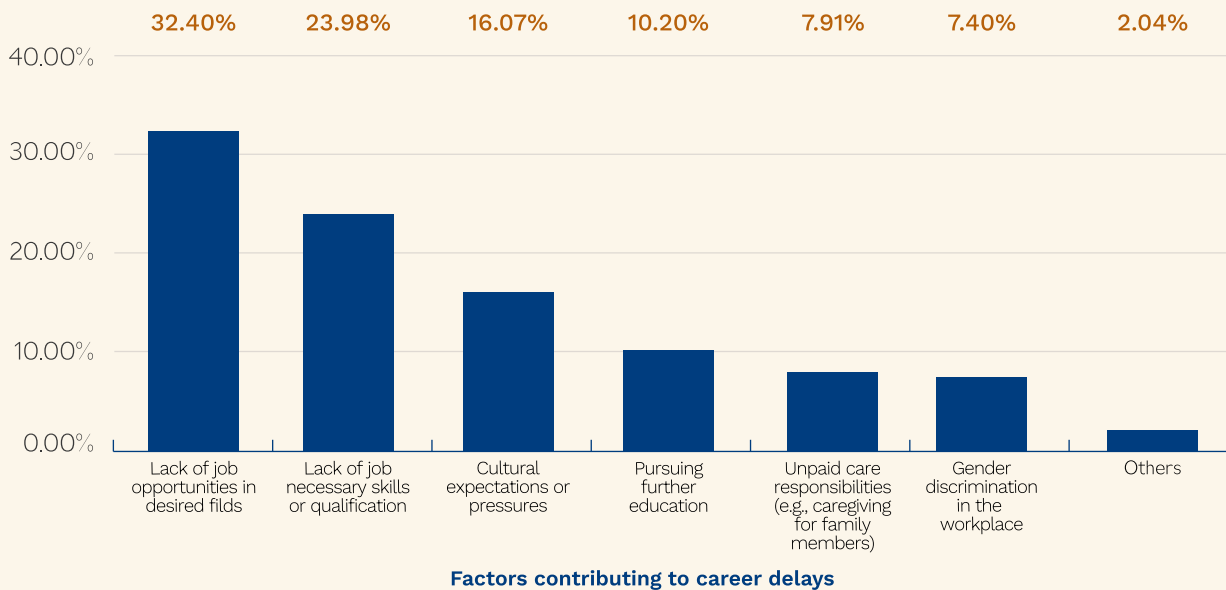


Figure 15. Factors Contributing to Respondents' Career Delay

The top three key factors contributing to career delays among female graduates include limited job opportunities in their desired field, lack of necessary skills, and cultural expectations.

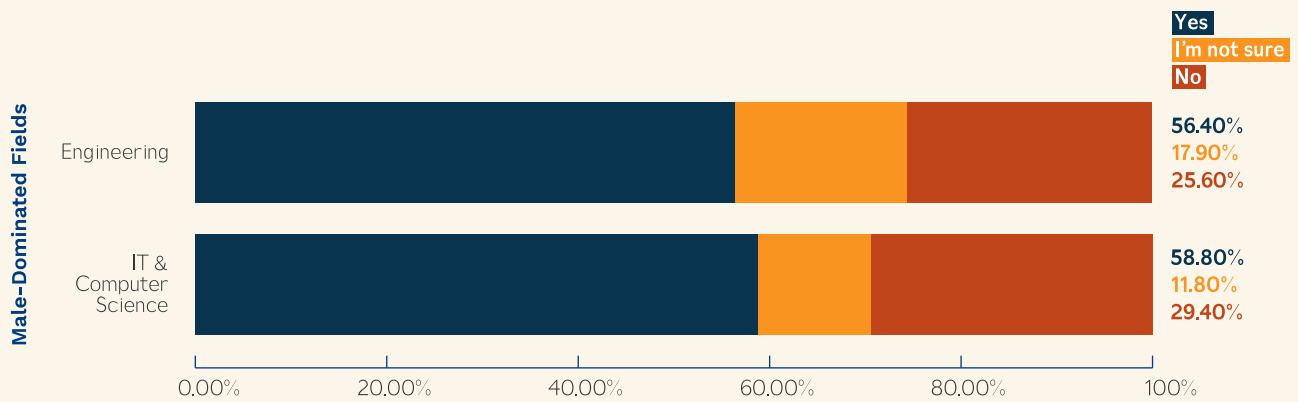


Figure 16. Respondents' Perceptions of Challenges Working in Male-Dominated Fields Across Engineering and IT & Computer Science Field

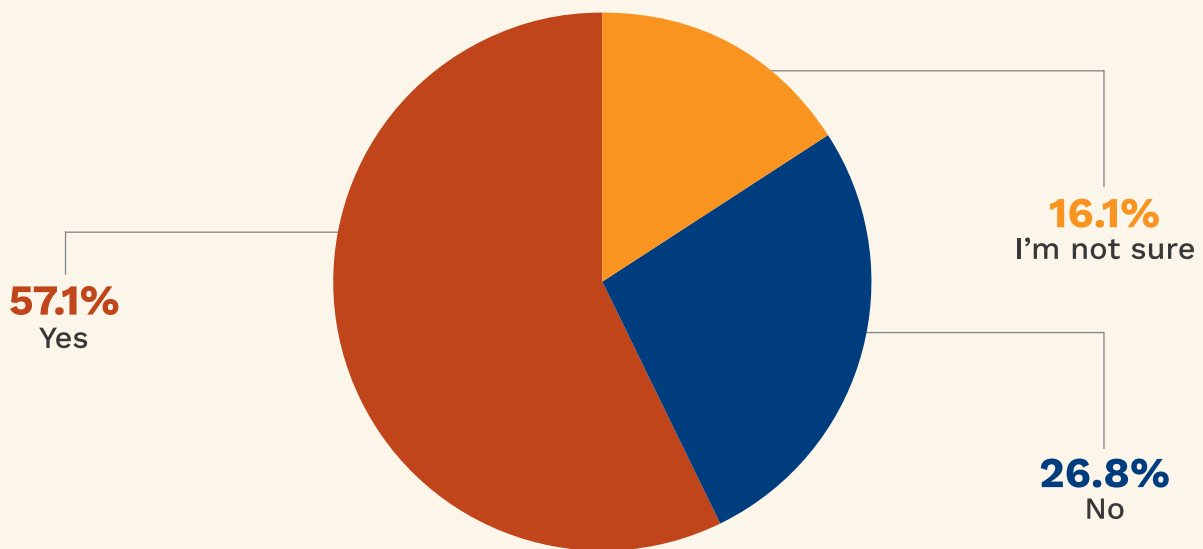


Figure 17. Respondents' Perceptions of Challenges Working in Male-Dominated Fields

The male-dominated fields are engineering and IT & Computer Science. Among the female participants who work in these two fields, more than half reported that they experience challenges in finding employment or working in these fields.

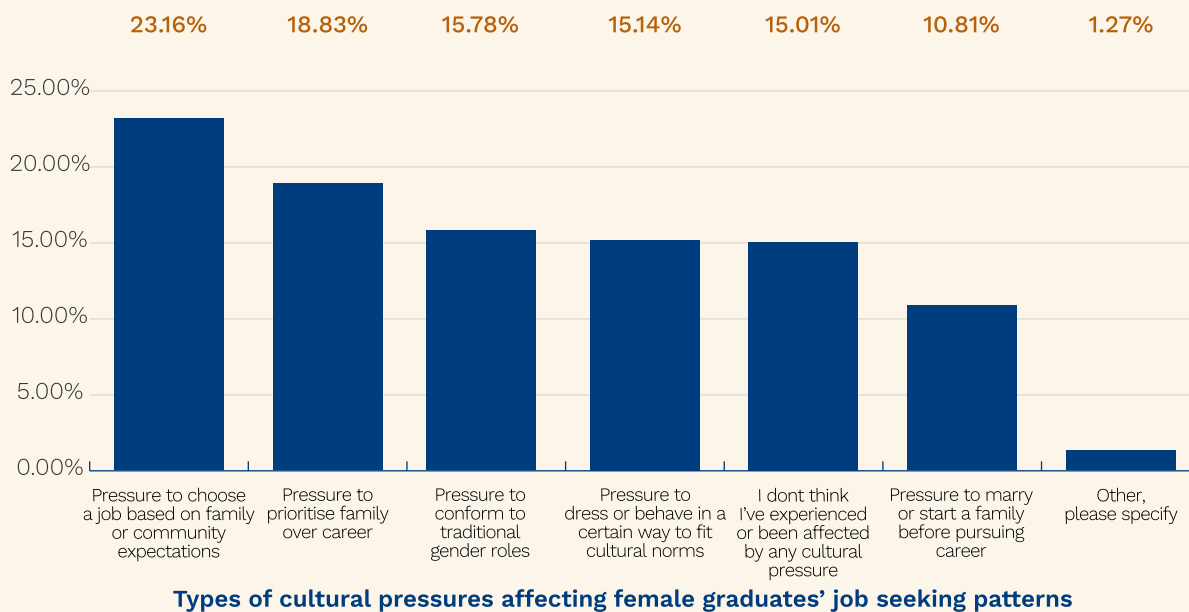


Figure 18. Types of Cultural Pressures Encountered by Respondents In Their Job Search

The top three cultural pressures affecting female graduates' job seeking patterns are pressure to choose a job based on family or community expectations, pressure to prioritise family over career, and pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

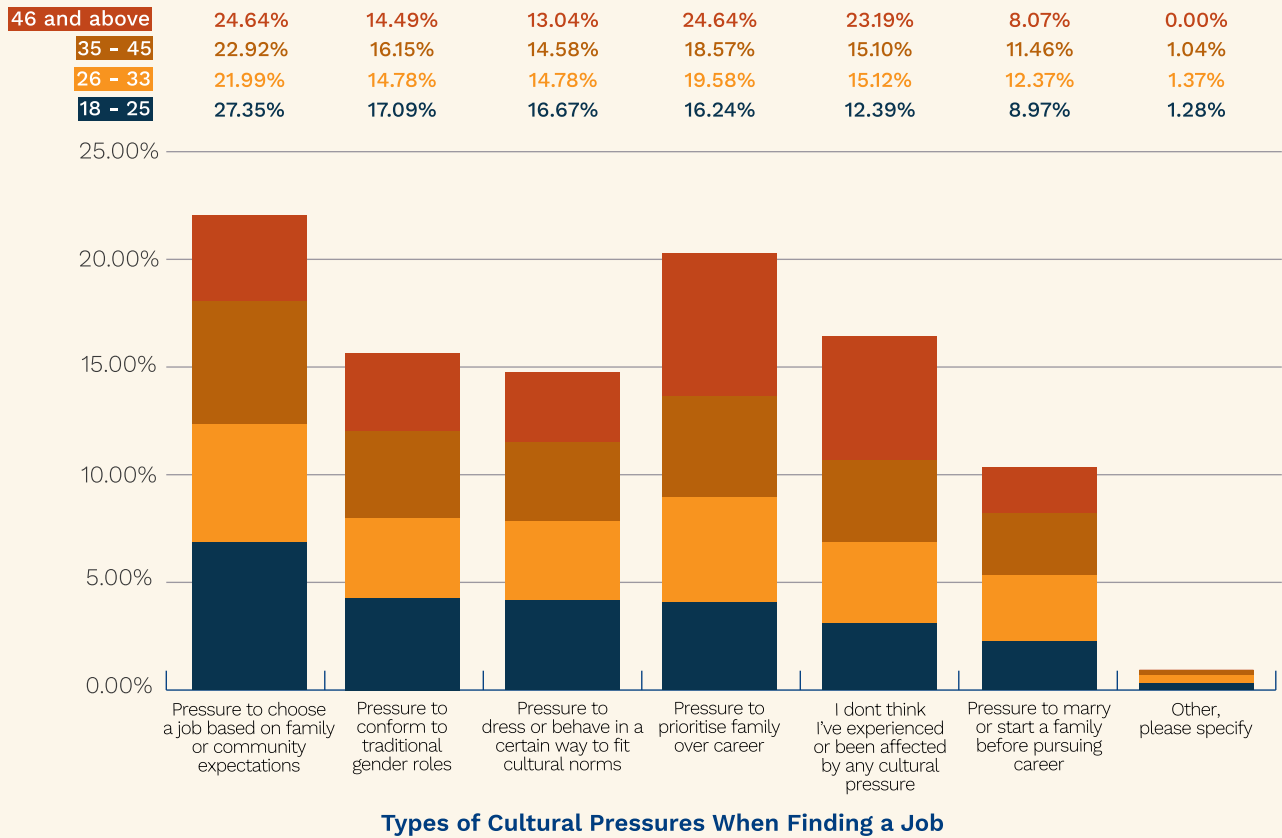
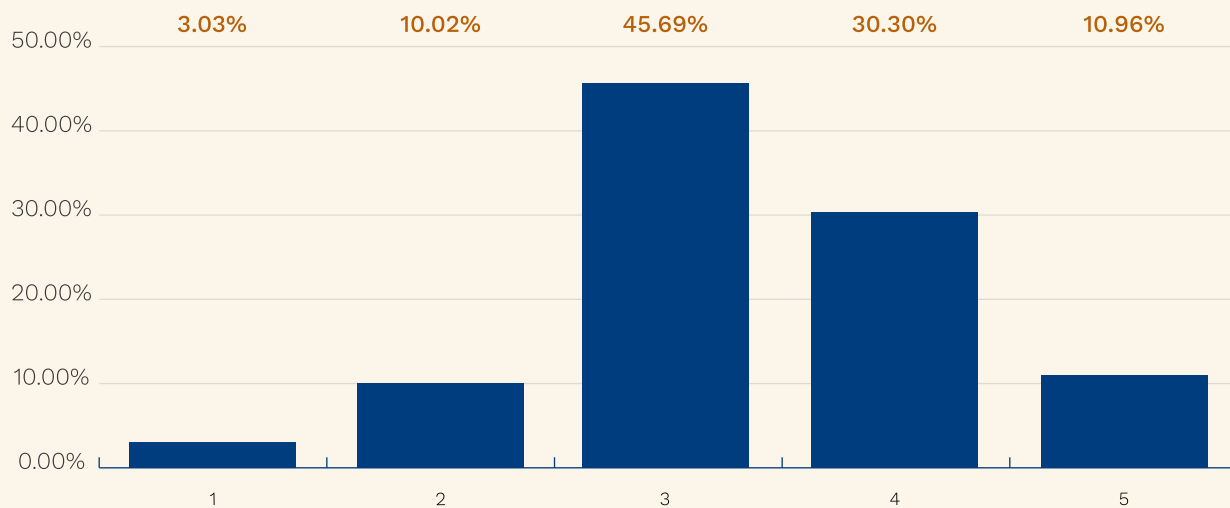


Figure 19. Types of Cultural Pressures Encountered by Respondents In Their Job Search Across Age Groups

There exists a notable variance in the cultural pressures encountered by women across various age groups during their job search. A general pattern of being pressured to choose a job based on family and community expectations is observed across three age groups excluding 46 and above. Among fresh graduates, the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles ranks as the second most prominent, followed by expectations related to dressing or behaving in a manner aligning with cultural norms. For millennials aged 26 to 33, the second significant cultural pressure revolves around prioritising family over career, while the third category includes those who did not face any specific cultural pressure. Individuals aged 34 to 45 share the same experience with the millennials. However, the third highest cultural pressure for the age group 34 to 45 is the pressure to take on traditional gender roles. Notably, women aged 46 and above prominently face pressure to prioritise family over career. While, a substantial number also indicates that they did not encounter any specific cultural pressure during their job search endeavours.



To what extent do cultural expectations or pressures influence your career decision?

Figure 20. Respondents' Ranking of Cultural Pressures In Career Decisions

A significant 45.69 percent of participants rated cultural expectations as moderately influential (Rank 3), indicating a substantial portion of women who regard cultural influence to exert a considerable impact on their career decisions. Additionally, 30.30 percent of the respondents ranked cultural expectations as very influential (Rank 4). While 10.96 percent of the participants chose the highest ranking, 5, signifying that a notable portion of female respondents believe that cultural expectations have an overwhelming impact on their career decisions. Meanwhile, 10 percent and 3.3 percent of respondents chose Rank 2 and Rank 1, respectively, suggesting a minority that feels a lower level of influence. These findings underscore the substantial impact of cultural expectations on female career decisions in Malaysia.

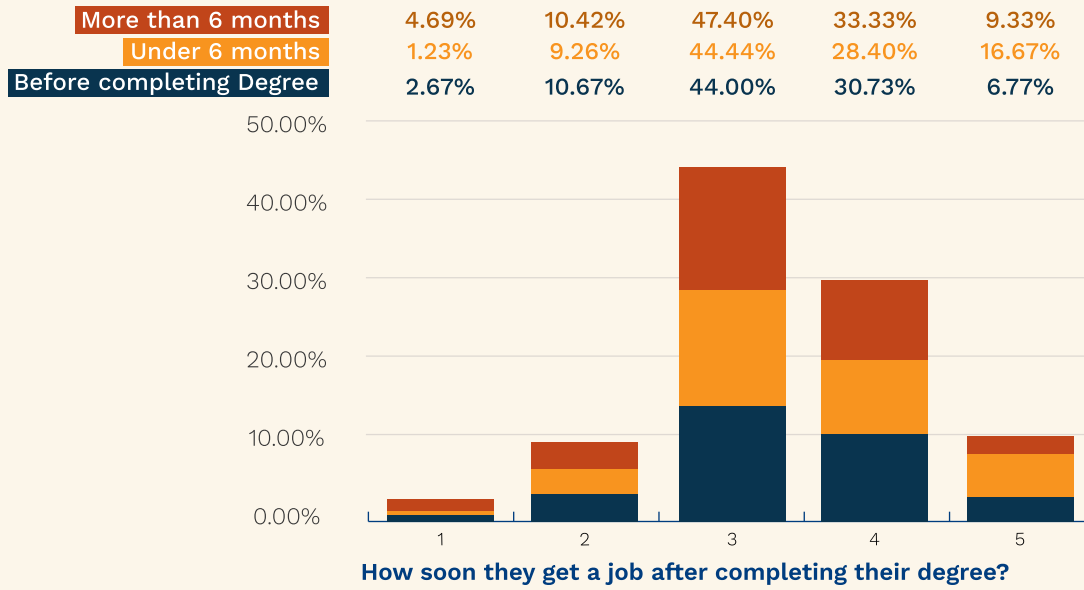


Figure 21. Respondents' Ranking of Cultural Pressures In Career Decisions Across Different Employment Timelines

The pattern of cultural expectations is similar across all three graduates' job employment timeline whereby the majority of them feel a moderate influence of cultural expectations on their career choices. However, it is important to note that 16.67 percent of graduates who secure a job within six months reported experiencing the highest rank of cultural pressure.

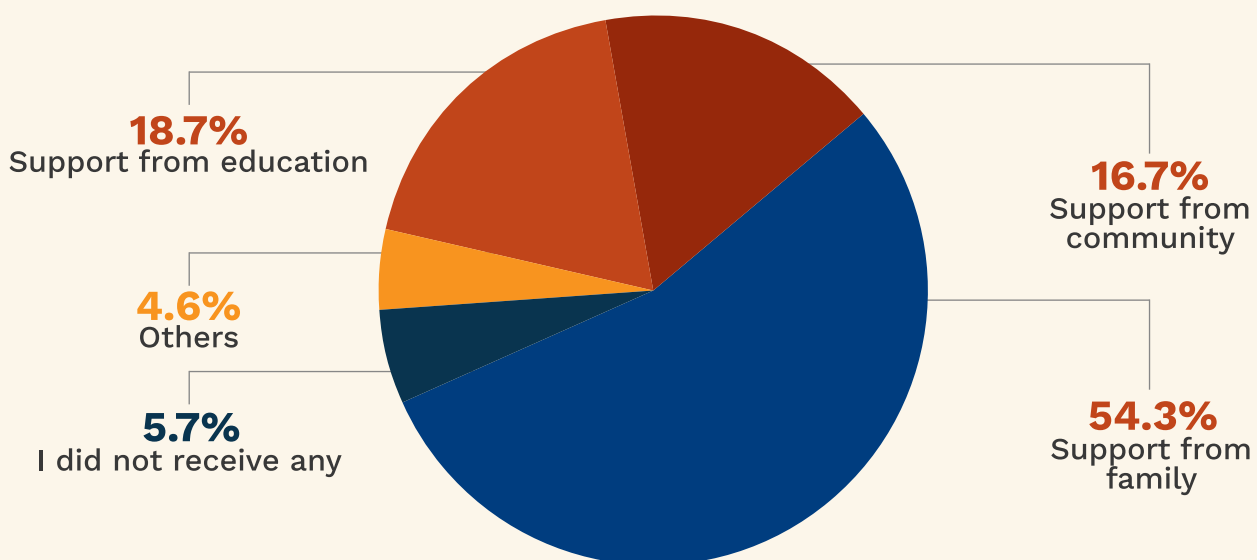


Figure 23. Respondents' Sources of Support When Pursuing Their Career Goals

In the context of job hunting in Malaysia, it becomes evident that female individuals heavily depend on their families for support. A significant majority of respondents, surpassing half, indicated that their family plays a pivotal role as their primary support system while pursuing their careers. However, this reliance on family also introduces pressure when it comes to job selection, as they find themselves obligated to meet familial expectations, thereby adding an additional layer of complexity to their decision-making process.

E. ETHNICITY AS A FACTOR IN JOB SEEKING

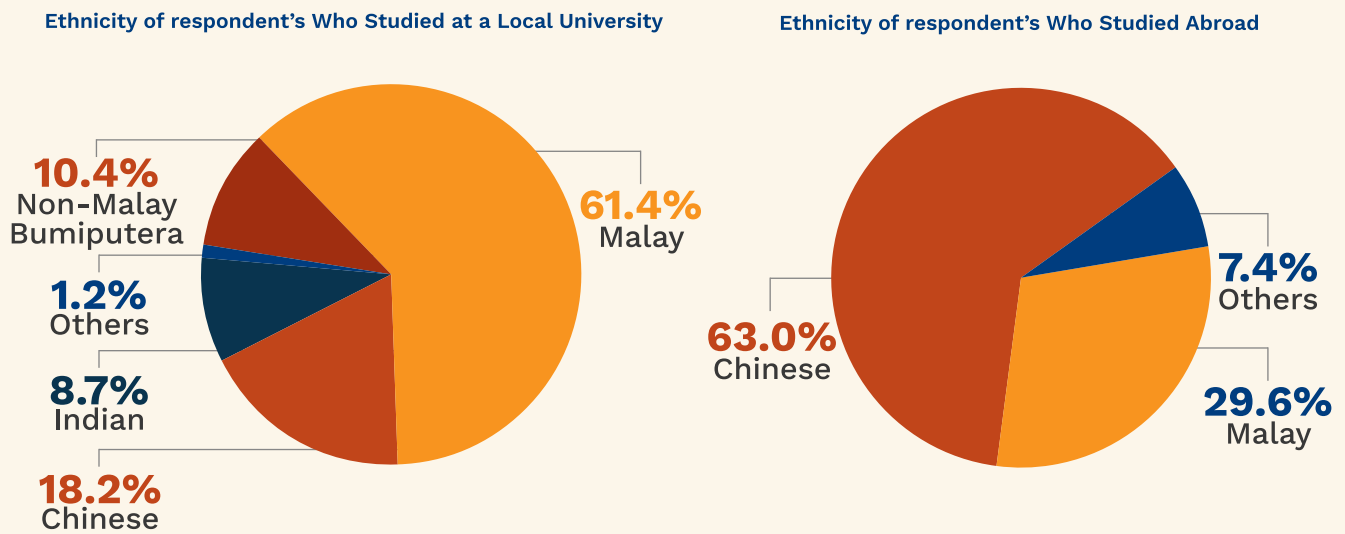
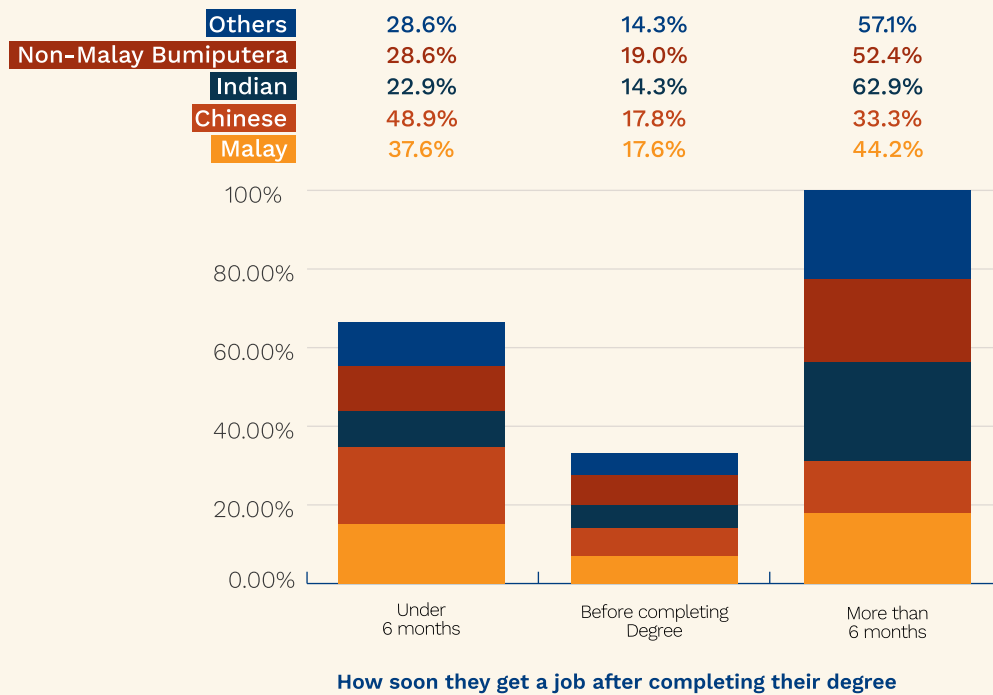


Figure 24. Respondents' Study Locations, Local vs. Abroad, Categorised by Ethnicity

Malays constitute the largest demographic group among students enrolled in local universities, followed by Chinese and Indians. In contrast, the dynamics shift when considering overseas education, where the majority is represented by Chinese, with Malays coming in second.



How soon they get a job after completing their degree
Figure 25. Respondents' Job Acquisition Timeline Across Ethnicity

Job acquisition timelines varies across ethnicity. Chinese individuals tend to achieve a high rate of employment within the initial six months post-graduation, while Indians, Malays and Non-Malay Bumiputera show a tendency to secure employment more than 6 months after graduation.

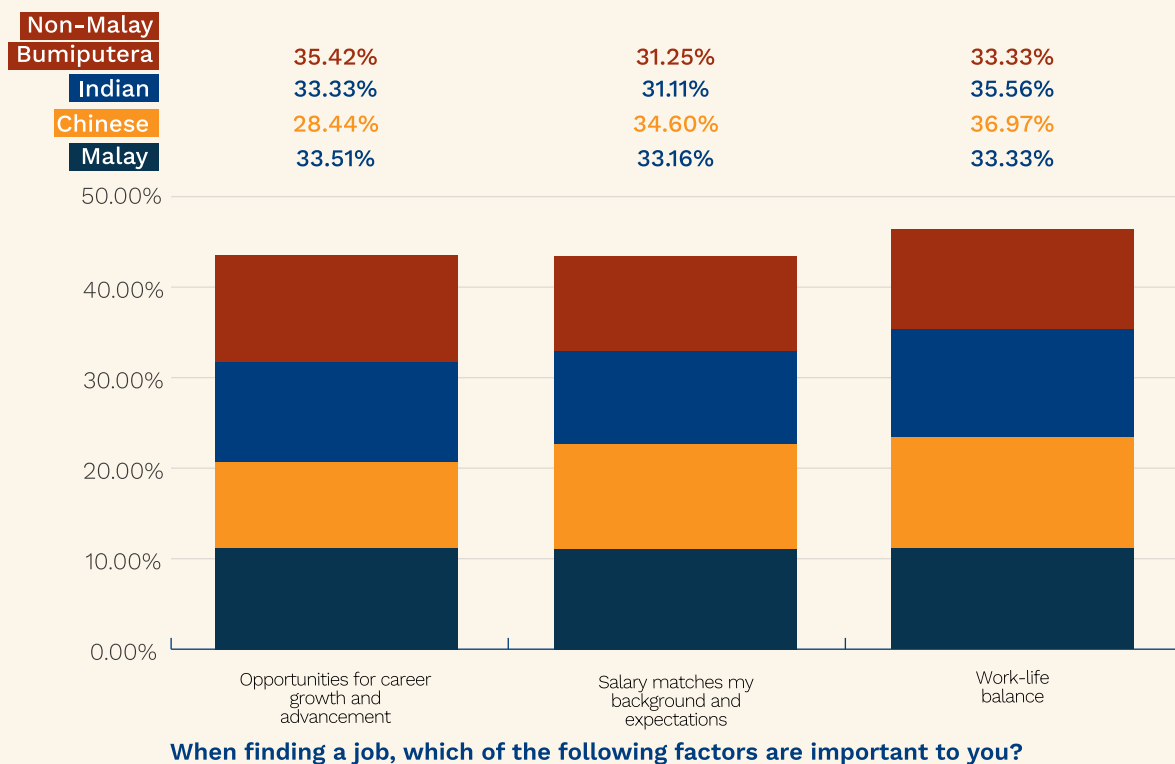


Figure 26. Factors Influencing Women's Job Search and Selection Process Across Ethnicity

For Malays and Non-Malay Bumiputera, the most important factor when finding a job is opportunities for career growth and advancement. In contrast, Chinese and Indians find work-life balance to be the most significant factor to consider during job-seeking. Nevertheless, a women-friendly workplace is consistently the 4th most important factor among most racial groups.

Malaysian Women in Workforce:
Charting a path to inclusive employment

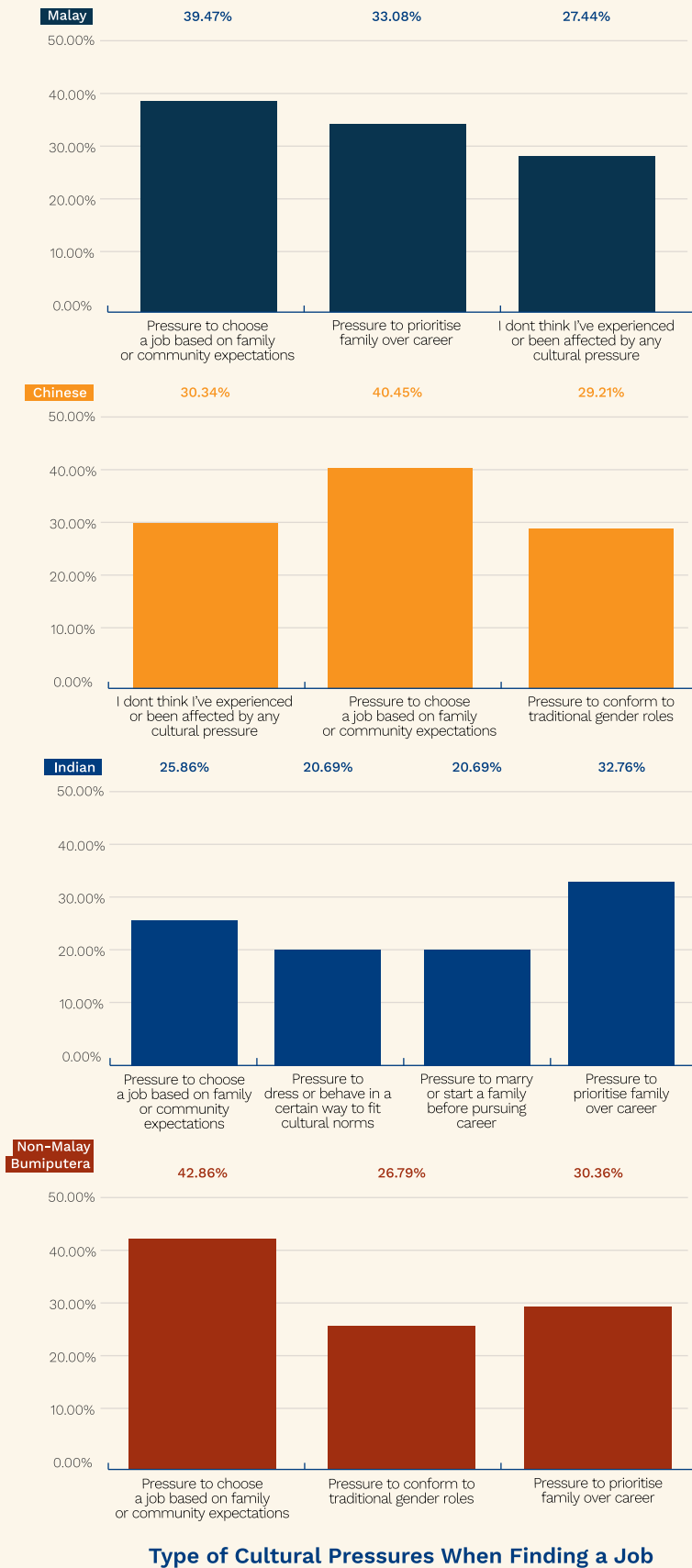


Figure 27. Types of Cultural Pressures Encountered by Respondents In Their Job Search Across Ethnicity

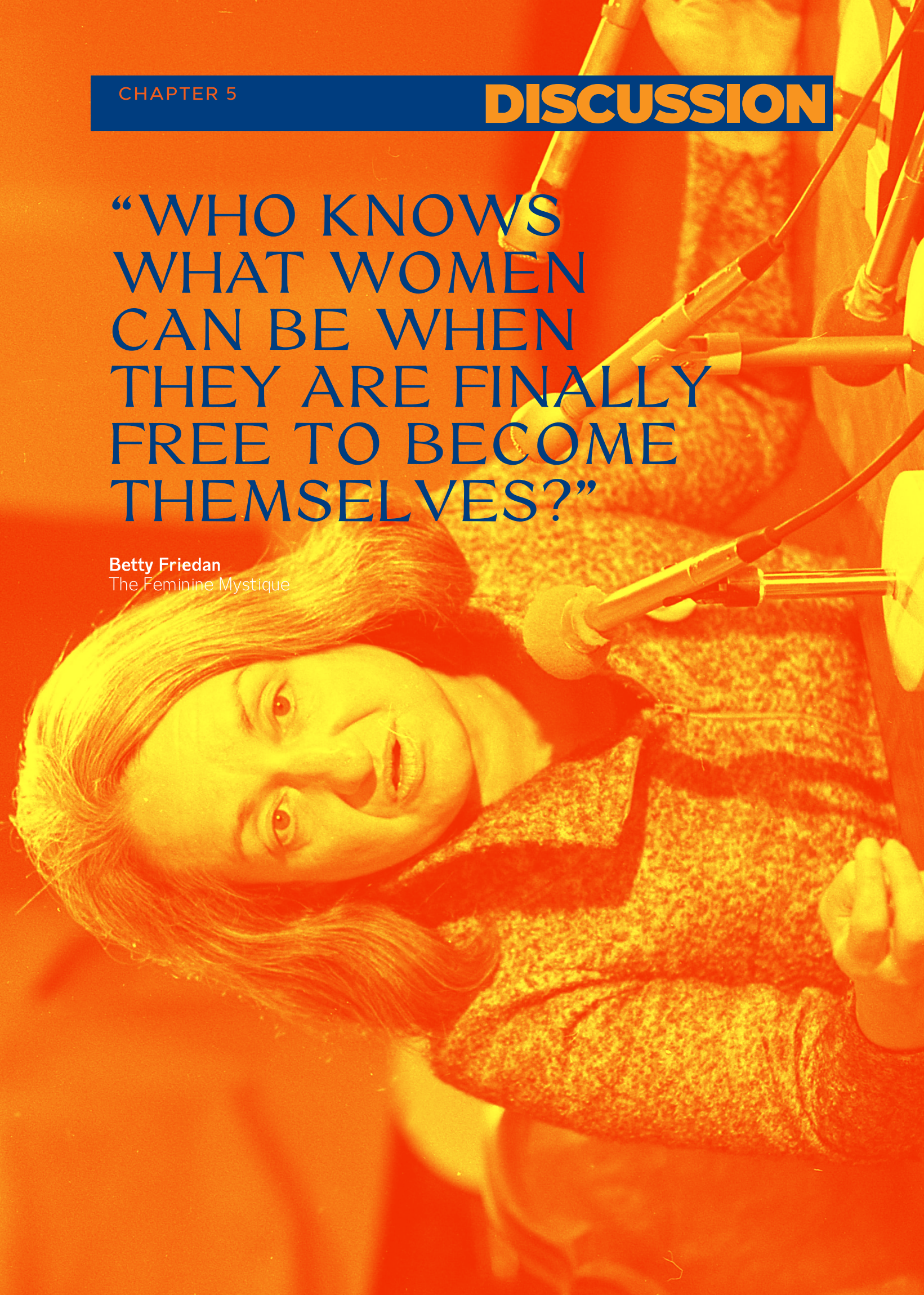
Malay, Chinese, and Non-bumiputera individuals all emphasise the importance of choosing a job based on family or community expectations as their primary cultural pressure. In contrast, Indians realise a higher emphasis on prioritising family over career as the most significant cultural pressure influencing their job search. Notably, a considerable number of Chinese and Malays mentioned not experiencing any specific cultural pressure within their top three factors. However, this pattern does not hold true for Indians and non-Malay bumiputeras. Perhaps exploring the rural-urban divide or workplace environments could offer valuable insights into this aspect.



PART 2

“WHO KNOWS
WHAT WOMEN
CAN BE WHEN
THEY ARE FINALLY
FREE TO BECOME
THEMSELVES?”




Betty Friedan
The Feminine Mystique



A. THE INTERPLAY OF FAMILY, CULTURE AND JOB CHOICES AMONG MALAYSIAN WOMEN

The Persistent Role of Family and Culture In Women's Careers

Our analysis unveiled that family is women's biggest source of support in their career but also the main source of challenge.³⁴ In our findings, respondents who identified family as their primary support in pursuing career goals also explicitly mentioned that their career delays were attributed to family responsibilities:

 25 years old, Sarawak	 31 years old, Kedah	 23 years old, Pahang
<i>Taking care of my family so others can do their own job first</i>	<i>My mother was hospitalized. No one can take care of her.</i>	<i>Yes, because I have to focus on my parents because I have to take care of them and they also need me to be around them.</i>

This insight underscores the enduring presence of family as a pivotal element in the lives of Malaysian women. Abdul et al.'s³⁵ study further underscores the impact of family life as a hindrance to the career development of Malaysian women, shedding light on the intricate challenges they face. In a similar vein, Dousin, Collins, and Kler's³⁶ research, focused on Malaysian women in medical professions, that delves into the struggle of these professionals in balancing dual roles at work and within the family sphere. Their findings underscore how these competing demands hinder women from achieving an optimal work-life balance. Despite these challenges, the participants in their study unanimously express that family remains their top priority, with a clear inclination to prioritise family over work.

The complex landscape encountered by Malaysian women in their professional paths can be attributed to the multifaceted interplay of cultural nuances, religious considerations, and entrenched gender norms that collectively shape the societal rules governing their experiences. Noor and Mohd³⁷ attributed the collectivist culture in Malaysia as causing the

³⁴ See figure 18, 19 & 23

³⁵ Ilhaamie Abdul, Hayaati Syed, and Siti Arni Basir, 'Facilitators of Women's Career Advancement in Public Service: A Study in a Developing Country,' ResearchGate (EJournal Publishing, 2013).

³⁶ Oscar Dousin, Ngan Collins, and Balvinder Kaur Kler, 'The Experience of Work-Life Balance for Women Doctors and Nurses in Malaysia,' Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources 60, no. 2 (January 27, 2021) 362-80.

³⁷ Noraini M Noor and Diana Mohd, 'Work, Family and Women's Well-Being in Malaysia,' Springer EBooks, January 1, 2016, 717-34, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9897-6_40.

internalisation of gender norms. In this cultural setting, men are seen as the economic heads of the family, while women are assigned the role of caregivers. Despite respondents in their study recognizing the insufficiency of a single wage earner in maintaining a decent standard of living, family obligations take precedence. The collectivist culture in Malaysia also extends beyond the nuclear family, encompassing relationships with in-laws, siblings of the spouse, and extended kin. In line with our findings, our respondents cited taking care of their extended family members as another cause for their career delay.



The predominant cultural pressures encountered by women in our survey during job searches include the expectation to choose a job based on family or community norms, the emphasis on prioritising family over career, and the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.³⁸ Notably, across ethnic groups, the nature of these cultural pressures varies, with Malay, Chinese, and Non-bumiputera respondents highlighting the importance of aligning job choices with family or community expectations.³⁹ Meanwhile, the majority of Indian respondents chose prioritising family over career as the primary cultural pressure influencing their job search. This finding indicates that women from different ethnic groups in Malaysia experience some form of familial pressure in finding employment.

Our research sheds light on the profound impact of family on the careers of Malaysian women. As indicated by the findings of Dousin, Collins, and Kler⁴⁰, when confronted with the choice between family and work, Malaysian women had to prioritise the former. It is crucial to recognize that this preference does not imply a lack of career orientation but rather underscores the equal importance they attribute to both facets of life.

³⁸ See figure 18

³⁹ See figure 27

⁴⁰ Oscar Dousin, Ngan Collins, and Balvinder Kaur Kler, "The Experience of Work-Life Balance for Women Doctors and Nurses in Malaysia," *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 60, no. 2 (January 27, 2021) 362-80.

The Crucial Role of Work-Life Balance in Job Search and Selection

A discussion of work-life balance is highly related to the persistent importance of family in the lives of Malaysian women. In our survey, we found that achieving a work-life balance has become a top priority for women when seeking employment.⁴¹ Work-life balance, as defined by existing studies, is the state characterised by the absence of conflict between work and personal life which could enhance work-life experience.⁴²

Our finding correlates with various other studies which also discovered that women in Malaysia prioritise work-life balance above other factors. Namely, Subramaniam, Overton and Maniam⁴³ ascertained that women in Malaysia who have a degree and earn above RM 7000 are more likely to want a flexible working arrangement as they believe that it would improve their relationship with their family. It's worth noting that all the women surveyed in our study hold degrees, providing further evidence of the correlation between educational attainment and the desire for work-life balance.

Nonetheless, we also noticed that work-life balance is an important factor in job search across all ages except for those aged 46 years and above.⁴⁴ We found it interesting that even young women between the ages of 18 and 25, want a work-life balance in their career. It's noteworthy that these young women, despite being in a life stage that may seem more conducive to a career-centric focus still prioritise work-life balance. Our findings corroborate the study by Chen et al.'s⁴⁵ study which found that both men and women anticipated the resumption of remote work after the pandemic and many preferred this type of work arrangement.

This preference for flexible work arrangements, as indicated by our observations and supported by the aforementioned study, suggests a noteworthy shift in how individuals, regardless of age or relationship status, perceive and prioritise work-life balance in their career choices.



⁴¹ See figure 12

⁴² Syifa Mustapa, Khairunneezam Noor, and Mahazan A Mutalib, 'Why Can't We Have Both? A Discussion on Work-Life Balance and Women Career Advancement in Malaysia,' ResearchGate (Korea Distribution Science Association, August 31, 2018) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327625531_Why_Can't_We_Have_Both_A_Discussion_on_Work-Life_Balance_and_Women_Career_Advancement_in_Malaysia.

⁴³ A. Geetha Subramaniam, B. John Overton, and C. Bala Maniam, 'Flexible Working Arrangements, Work Life Balance and Women in Malaysia,' International Journal of Social Science and Humanity 5, no. 1 (2015) 34-38, <https://doi.org/10.7763/ijssh.2015.v5.417>.

⁴⁴ See figure 13

⁴⁵ Yuting Chen et al, 'The Impact of Covid-19 on Workers' Expectations and Preferences for Remote Work,' Ssrn.com, February 2023.

B. PERSISTENT TRENDS OF HORIZONTAL GENDER SEGREGATION IN MALAYSIA'S EDUCATIONAL AND EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE

Unequal Representation of Women Across Different Fields

Our findings confirm the enduring pattern of horizontal gender segregation within the education and work realm.⁴⁶ Horizontal gender segregation refers to the unequal distribution of men and women across different job roles, positions, or fields of work within an organisation or industry. It occurs when men and women are concentrated in different types of jobs or occupations, often along stereotypical lines. In other words, certain industries or professions are dominated by either men or women, thus creating a horizontal divide in the workforce.⁴⁷ Horizontal gender segregation which stems from unequal representation of women in different fields of studies persists when women enter the labour market.

Our research highlights a notable trend wherein women predominantly occupy non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields in both the university and in the employment sector.⁴⁸

Numerous studies in Malaysia have delved into this issue which points to the persistence of this gender segregationist pattern in Malaysian society. Goy et al.'s⁴⁹ research revealed that despite a higher presence of Malaysian women in higher education, and a substantial increase in the percentage of women in STEM fields since the 1980s, there remains a high concentration of women in non-STEM disciplines as compared to STEM disciplines. Indeed, Elhadary and Samat's study⁵⁰ has emphasised that at the macro-level, it may appear that gender-based divisions have diminished but a closer examination at the micro-level exposes a substantial gap. This gap is evident in the unequal representation of genders across various fields in universities and in the labour market.



⁴⁶ See figure 4, 5, 7, & 8


⁴⁷ Moris Triventi, 'Something Changes, Something Not: Long-Term Trends in Gender Segregation of Fields of Study in Italy,' *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 2, no. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* 2/2 (June 2010)47-80, <https://jse.padovauniversitypress.it/2010/2/3>.

⁴⁸ See figure 4 & 7

⁴⁹ Siew Ching Goy et al., 'Swimming against the Tide in STEM Education and Gender Equality: A Problem of Recruitment or Retention in Malaysia,' *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 11 (January 30, 2017)1793-1809, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1277383>.


⁵⁰ Yasin Elhadary and Narimah Samat, 'Addressing Gender Disparity in Public Universities of Malaysia: Challenges and Achievements,' *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice* 23, no. 14 (September 15, 2023)<https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v23i14.6390>.

The existence of gender-essentialist beliefs in society could explain this gap. These beliefs perpetuate the notion that women possess better interpersonal, people-oriented, and nurturing skills,⁵¹ while men are perceived to excel in analytical skills. These beliefs, socialised as gender norms by family and friends at a tender age contribute to the ongoing disparities by pushing women to choose non-STEM subjects in their education. Moreover, when women do get a job, they experience other barriers such as unequal income and growth opportunities as stated by our respondents:



39 years old, Sarawak

“Women’s salary is low compare to male’s salary”



24 years old, Selangor

“The way most people commonly accept man easily and being judgemental to women even the industry is women dominated industry”


The Leaky Pipeline: Women's Education and Employment Mismatch in Key Sectors

Intriguingly, we discovered a significant mismatch between the academic backgrounds of women and their initial employment, as some of the respondents stated:



31 years old, Selangor

“Actually I started my career as a contract-term worker. After my 3 years contract ended, I [had difficulty] finding the exact degree-related career that suited me.”



28 years old, Pahang


“Pemilihan wanita selepas tamat pengajian adalah terhad kerana lebih memerlukan tenaga lelaki”

⁵¹ Maria Charles and Karen Bradley, 'Indulging Our Gendered Selves? Sex Segregation by Field of Study in 44 Countries,' *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 4 (January 2009):924-76. <https://doi.org/10.1086/595942>.

⁵² See figure 9

Our study found an overrepresentation of women with non-business and sales academic backgrounds working in the sector. In contrast, there is an ample number of women with a Sciences* degree who left the field when they entered the job market. This confirms our speculation that female science graduates left the field to work in a job not related to their degree, possibly in non-STEM fields.

The problem of women in STEM changing their field once they enter the job market is not novel and has been proven in several studies.⁵³ The phenomenon is often referred to as the leaky pipeline metaphor which captures the consistent loss of women in the Science and Technology field from elementary school through the tertiary level and into the workforce.⁵⁴ Despite excelling in their studies, capable girls tend to opt for non-STEM subjects when planning their academic and professional endeavours. In Malaysia, this phenomenon could be explained by the challenging STEM labour market and the persistent gender wage gap in the field.⁵⁵ Many of our respondents stated encountering gender barriers and discrimination in STEM jobs:



24 years old, Perak
Bachelor's Degree in Sciences*

"It is more challenging for women to get [a] job as the company prefer to hire men as they will not [be] facing issues such as pregnancy, holiday, menstrual pain, etc. Other than that, company also prefer the job seeker that have more experience in the field and not fresh grad."



24 years old, Melaka
Bachelor's Degree in Sciences*

"Some industry prefer men worker than women"

Moreover, Ariffin's⁵⁶ research on female technical graduates in the Malaysian construction sector revealed that negative perceptions of the field propel women away. This perception encompasses concerns about harsh working conditions, a predominantly male-dominated work environment, and limited prospects for career advancement within the industry. Nevertheless, these perceptions are not baseless but rooted in unequal access to these occupations, as stated by one of the respondents:

⁵³ Suhaida Mohd Amin, Nurulhuda Mohd Satar, and Su Fei Yap, "Trained in Science-Base Field: Change of Specialization among Educated Women in Malaysia," *MOJES: Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2015) 38-45 ; Mohd Hisham Ariffin, "Attrition Issues of Technical Female Graduates in the Malaysian Construction Industry 2013 Pdf," *Academia.edu*, October 4, 2016. ; Badrul Hisham Kamaruddin and Rohani Mohamad, "Women in Science and Technology: Malaysia Perspective," *The NIEW Journal* 7 (2015)

⁵⁴ Badrul Hisham Kamaruddin and Rohani Mohamad, "Women in Science and Technology: Malaysia Perspective," *The NIEW Journal* 7 (2015)

⁵⁵ Suhaida Mohd Amin, Nurulhuda Mohd Satar, and Su Fei Yap, "Trained in Science-Base Field: Change of Specialization among Educated Women in Malaysia," *MOJES: Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Sciences* 3, no. 4 (2015) 38-45. <https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/MOJES/article/view/12785>.

⁵⁶ Mohd Hisham Ariffin, "Attrition Issues of Technical Female Graduates in the Malaysian Construction Industry 2013 Pdf," *Academia.edu*, October 4, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/28906564/Attrition_issues_of_Technical_Female_Graduates_in_the_Malaysian_Construction_Industry_2013_pdf.



26 years old,
Sabah

“From my point of view, most of the employers prefer to hire men than women. When I attended [a] job interview, I [am] always been (sic) asked about my marital status and if I have any plans to get married in near future or [if] I want to get pregnant and so on.”

However, it is essential to recognize that the misalignment between academic degrees and job roles in STEM cannot be universally applied to all STEM subjects. Our observations reveal that the leaky pipeline phenomenon is evident in the Sciences* but not in Engineering. Specifically, individuals who pursued engineering studies typically found employment in engineering roles, highlighting a noteworthy distinction within STEM fields. Further studies should be conducted to examine the existence or lack thereof of the leaky pipeline metaphor in various STEM fields in Malaysia.

Women Encounter Challenges in Male-Dominated Professions

Despite the comparatively favourable standing of female engineering graduates in the job market, they still face challenges when navigating a male-dominated field. Our study determined Engineering and IT & Computer Science as being one such male-dominated field. Among the women in the field, more than half agreed that they experience challenges.⁵⁷



23 years old, Terengganu
Bachelor’s Degree in Engineering

“For engineering female graduate, there are indeed times that we are not preferred to be hired due to the nature of the work, so it took quite some time to find a job that is okay to hire women for the position”



25 years old, Sarawak
Bachelor’s Degree in Engineering

“As for engineering, many want men because they assumed that the men can do the job when women also can do them too....[we] should be given a chance as well”

⁵⁷ See figure 16

Certainly, women aspiring to pursue careers in engineering and technology encounter challenges in Malaysia. Despite a substantial number of women enrolling in related university courses, their presence in the workforce remains significantly limited. In 2019, a mere 7 percent of women held the status of professional engineers with practising certificates, the highest qualification level for engineers in Malaysia.⁵⁸ This stark underrepresentation underscores the obstacles women face in transitioning from educational pursuits to establishing a notable presence within the professional engineering landscape in the country.

This finding echoes the study on barriers faced by women engineers in Malaysia by Lim and Ngo⁵⁹ who discovered that although Malaysian women engineers may not face direct discrimination, indirect barriers are prominent. Women engineers face the challenge of balancing work and personal life due to ingrained societal norms that prioritise traditional gender roles, relegating women to the primary roles of mothers and wives ahead of their roles as engineers. Another social barrier unveiled in the study is the pervasive dominance of men in leadership positions within engineering companies. This prevailing trend creates a challenging environment where decisions conducive to fostering a more women-friendly atmosphere within the company become inherently difficult to materialise.

C. LABOUR MARKET TRANSITION: THE DUAL INFLUENCE OF JOB MISMATCH AND ETHNICITY

Our study discovered two prominent factors aggravating women's labour force transition: Job Mismatch and Ethnicity.

Factors Contributing to Career Delay

In addition to inquiring about when respondents secured their first job, we also sought insights from them on the factors contributing to any career delays. Our findings unveiled that the primary factors include lack of job opportunities in desired fields, lack of necessary skills or qualifications and cultural expectations or pressures.⁶⁰ The lack of job opportunities in the desired field aligns with our finding of the mismatch between the degree obtained and the actual job role since the lack of job opportunities in the

⁵⁸ SWE Blog, "Different or More of the Same? Malaysian Women in Engineering and Technology Fields - All Together," All Together, September 9, 2021. .

⁵⁹ Lim Shiang Shiang and Ngo Edmund, "Unconscious and Unseen Barriers: A Gender Study of Malaysian Women Engineers," International Journal of Communication, Management and Humanities AID Conference Proceedings, 2020, 108-17.http://www.myaidconference.com/uploads/6/2/6/7/62670651/ijcomah_vol_1_issue_1_june_2020.pdf#page=114.

⁶⁰ See figure 15

desired field might lead graduates to change their field. A comparable study by Lim, Rich and Harris⁶¹ also found the type of degree, ethnicity and the volume of applicants as factors influencing employment outcomes. This finding shows that the type of degree significantly impacts one's success in the job market which possibly indicates that Malaysia is facing a challenge where the degrees obtained are not in alignment with the demands of the labour market.

The Influence of Job Mismatch in Labour Market Transition

There is a significantly high employment rate among female engineering graduates, with 53.65 percent securing jobs within the first six months after graduation. In contrast, Sciences* graduates are less likely to find employment within the same timeframe with 55.8 percent of them finding a job in more than 6 months, indicating a notable difference in the job market dynamics for these disciplines.⁶² As one of our respondents stated:



24 years old,
Johor

"In my opinion, this delays depends on the courses. Some courses prioritise men compared to women."

Engineering graduates appear to fare better than Sciences* graduates. Nevertheless, female Sciences* graduates face a longer job search duration compared to their counterparts in non-STEM fields such as Business and Sales, Social Sciences, and Accountancy. Those with a non-STEM background tend to secure employment faster than their peers holding a Science* degree. Our findings on the different employment rate between Engineering and Sciences* majors echoes the study by White and Smith⁶³ in the United Kingdom whereby different STEM majors have different employability rates – Engineering and Computer Science graduates are more likely to be employed within six months than Biology majors.

The differential hiring rate between degree backgrounds highlights the persistent problem of job mismatch in Malaysia, with 42% of all jobseekers in the country facing this issue according to a recent Bernama report.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Hock Eam Lim, Judith Rich, and Mark N Harris, "Employment Outcomes of Graduates: The Case of Universiti Utara, Malaysia*," *Asian Economic Journal* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2008) 321-41.

⁶² See figure 10 & 11

⁶³ Patrick White and Emma Smith, "From Subject Choice to Career Path:Female STEM Graduates in the UK Labour Market," *Oxford Review of Education* 48, no. 6 (December 22, 2021) 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.2011713>.

⁶⁴ Tilo, "Government 'Working on Aligning' Skills Mismatch in Malaysia."

Considering gender, the mismatch was greater for women. Coupled with systemic and cultural barriers when accessing the labour market, the problem becomes even more complex for female graduates. Due to the issue of job mismatch where the skills and qualifications they possess may not align with the available opportunities. Previous studies for instance found that, given the existing climate, 36.9% of all women who graduated from science based degrees opted for non-science jobs.⁶⁵

The Influence of Ethnicity in Labour Market Transition

The job employment timeline is also significantly influenced by ethnicity, revealing a notable discrepancy among different ethnic groups. However, it's important to note that ethnicity is not the primary focus of the study; rather, its relevance emerges as an anticipated byproduct due to the inherent multiracial nature of the Malaysian context. Chinese female graduates stand out, with the largest proportion finding employment within 6 months, whereas Indians show the highest percentage for those securing a job after more than 6 months.⁶⁶ This finding concurs with Lee's⁶⁷ study which establishes that race holds greater significance than resume quality in determining success of securing a job interview in Malaysia. The study, which involved sending fictitious resumes, highlighted that individuals with Chinese proficiency stand a higher chance of being selected when applying to both Chinese and foreign companies, emphasising a preference for Chinese resumes. One of our respondents explicitly stated this ethnic bias in finding employment:



41 years old,
Penang

“Bukan sekadar wanita saja, untuk lelaki pun tidak dapat jugak kerja related study di malaysia.kerajaan hanya pentingkan warga melayu. komuniti cina pentingkan same race. as indian i cant get job suitable for my study”

⁶⁵ Amin, 'Trained in Science-Base Field: Change of Specialization among Educated Women in Malaysia.'

⁶⁶ See figure 25

⁶⁷ Hwok-Aun Lee, 'Discrimination of High Degrees: Race and Graduate Hiring in Malaysia,' *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 21, no.1 (2015)53-76. .

⁶³ Patrick White and Emma Smith, 'From Subject Choice to Career Path:Female STEM Graduates in the UK Labour Market,' *Oxford Review of Education* 48, no. 6 (December 22, 2021) 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2021.2011713>.

⁶⁴ Tilo, 'Government 'Working on Aligning' Skills Mismatch in Malaysia.'

⁶⁵ Amin, 'Trained in Science-Base Field: Change of Specialization among Educated Women in Malaysia.'

⁶⁶ See figure 25

⁶⁷ Hwok-Aun Lee, 'Discrimination of High Degrees: Race and Graduate Hiring in Malaysia,' *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 21, no.1 (2015)53-76. .

Similarly, Cheing and Narayanan's⁶⁸ found that among all of the personal attributes studied, ethnicity is the only significant factor affecting job seekers in Malaysia. The prevalence of ethnicity in the labour market signifies that ethnicity continues to dominate in many aspects of Malaysian society, including our examination of women in the workforce.

**This finding shows that
discrimination in the labour market is
not solely the product of gender biases
but is compounded by ethnicity.
The intersection of gender and ethnicity
in the landscape of Malaysia's labour
market shape the employment
prospects of women.**

This dual burden places women at a distinct disadvantage, as they navigate a landscape where both gender and ethnicity contribute to systemic barriers and biases.

⁶⁸ Jia-Qi Cheong and Suresh Narayanan. 'Factors Affecting the Transition from University to Work in Selected Malaysian Cities: Is a Public University Degree a Disadvantage?.' Asia Pacific Journal of Education, 2021.



A. MAINSTREAMING FAMILY IN POLICIES

In formulating policies aimed at augmenting the presence of women in the Malaysian workforce, it is imperative to take into account the importance of family for Malaysian women. In 2019, the Malaysian Family Declaration (DKM) was launched with the objective of mainstreaming families into the national agenda. We advocate for a change in policy lens that provides everyone the opportunity to balance their family and work, given that Malaysia's development remains closely intertwined with the integrity of the family unit. Achieving this goal requires the revitalization of the Malaysian Family Declaration (DKM) across all ministries and government agencies, grounded in the recognition that genuine social, economic, and political development is intricately linked with the strength and well-being of the family unit.

01 **Enhancing parental leave policies by extending maternity and paternity leave, with a particular emphasis on making paternity leave mandatory.**



Drawing inspiration from Nordic countries like Norway and Denmark, where parental leave policies are notably comprehensive, there is an understanding that granting parental leave benefits both parents and, by extension, society. In Norway, parents are entitled to a total of 12 months' leave in connection with childbirth, including pre-birth and post-birth periods.⁶⁹ In Denmark, mothers enjoy four weeks' leave before delivery, and

both parents are entitled to 24 weeks' leave with parental benefits after the birth, totaling 52 weeks.⁷⁰ The recent amendments to The Employment Act 1955, which extended maternity leave to 98 days and paternity leave to 7 days, mark a significant step toward enhancing parental leave policies. This move should pave the way to a long-term expansion of mandatory parental leave, starting with extending maternity leave up to four months and paternity leave to a month. Paternal leave should be mandatory because men often hesitate to take the leave due to the intense gender stigma associated with prioritising their family over work thus discouraging them from taking the leave.⁷¹ Affording parents the flexibility to concentrate on

⁶⁹ Nordic Co-operation, "Parental Benefit in Norway," Nordic cooperation, 2024.

⁷⁰ Nordic Co-operation, "Parental Benefit in Denmark," Nordic cooperation, 2024.

⁷¹ Darren Rosenblum, "Mandatory Paternity Leave: The Key to Workplace Equality," Forbes, October 2, 2020.

welcoming their child into the world is not merely an individual perk but rather an investment in collective welfare.

02 Implementation of stricter measures to enhance anti-discrimination laws's effectiveness.

Enforcement of anti-discrimination laws in Article 8(2) of the Federal Constitution and Section 37 (4) of the Employment Act 1955 should be strongly upheld. The recently revised paternity leave from 3 to 7 days has brought unintended consequences such as hiring biases and stigmatisation of women. Recently, New Straits Times reported that a man seeking paternity leave to attend to his wife after their child's birth, was instructed to resign from his position.⁷²



Essentially, men are also experiencing discrimination, potentially discouraging them from taking the already limited leave to take care of their newborns. Furthermore, a survey on the amended employment law indicated that 41.3% of businesses were more inclined to hire male employees than women.⁷³ Currently, the fine for employers is set at a maximum of RM50,000 but if the offence persists, they may incur a daily fine not more than RM1000 for each day. The government should consider reviewing and adjusting the fines to encourage compliance among employers. However, beyond punitive measures, the governments can introduce tax deductions for businesses to provide longer paternity leaves. For example, in The United States, employers can claim the Employer Credit for paid family and medical Leave if they provide at least two weeks of paid leave. The credit starts at 12.5% of the wages and goes up to a maximum of 25%, depending on how much the leave payment exceeds 50% of the employee's regular wages.⁷⁴

⁷² New Straits Times, "Man Told to Quit after Taking Paternity Leave," NST Online (New Straits Times, May 6, 2023).

⁷³ FMT Reporters, "More Men Being Hired as Women Get Longer Maternity Leave," Free Malaysia Today (FMT)February 20, 2023. .

⁷⁴ "Employers May Claim Tax Credit for Providing Paid Family and Medical Leave to Employees|Internal Revenue Service." Irs.gov. 2019. .

03 Establishing the Women's Career Comeback Program as a permanent initiative.



One of the ongoing efforts to boost Malaysia's FLFPR is the Career Comeback Program conducted by Talent Corporation Malaysia (TalentCorp). Designed to help women return to the workforce, the program offers individual income tax

exemption of up to 12 months, connecting them with potential employers, and organising career comeback workshops and events. The success of the program is evident through its extension until the year 2027, as outlined in Budget 2024. However, the program should not have a deadline and should remain as a permanent initiative to ensure sustained support for women

04 Revising the Employment Act 1955 for a more robust and effective framework for implementing flexible work arrangements (FWA).

The 2022 amendment of the Employment Act 1955 has introduced the option of flexible working arrangements to employees. However, the provision fails to address the aim of FWA and lacks a detailed framework for its implementation. The current provision states that the employer can refuse employees' application but must state the ground



of such refusal. However, the provision does not specify the criteria for what qualifies as a reasonable ground for rejection. Therefore, it is imperative that the legislation is reviewed, whereby any rejection of applications on reasons related to family responsibilities and care work are outlawed.

Moreover, the provisions on FWA should be anchored on the promotion of family-friendly policies and gender inclusivity. Prominent examples of such policies can be observed in Portugal and Iceland where parents have the ability to work from home without prior approval from their employers for at least 20% of their work week hours.⁷⁵ In The Netherlands, parents have the flexibility to work part time hours depending on their availability.⁷⁶

05 Making childcare a public good to ensure equitable provision.



Presently, workplace childcare centres are only mandatory in the public sector, whereas it depends on the employers' initiative in the private sector. Nevertheless, the government offers incentives, including a 10% tax reduction for a decade of operation to private companies establishing child

care facilities. Experts at TalentCorp note that existing childcare initiatives are predominantly tailored for B40 families, such as the RM180 fee subsidies initiative under the federal Welfare Department benefiting those with a per capita income of RM800,⁷⁷ leaving out M40 families entirely. Selangor's MamaKerja childcare incentive, offering a one-time payment of RM1000 for households earning RM8000 or less with a minimum of 3 children aged 12 or under, and the Asuh Pintar Scheme, providing RM100 monthly child care fee subsidies for M40 families are good examples of childcare initiatives that considers both B40 and M40 families. Therefore, these initiatives should be initiated at the federal level. Looking ahead, a more comprehensive and inclusive solution involves considering childcare as a public good, akin to public schools. This could be done by amending the Education Act 1966 to include nurseries and daycares under the Act as part of early childhood education. For instance, in Denmark, each child is guaranteed a place in a public childcare facility starting from six months of age which the government subsidises 75 percent of the expenses, with the

⁷⁵ "Statistics Iceland. Third of Employees Worked from Home," Statistics Iceland, n.d. / Mauve Group, "Which Countries Have Flexible Work Policies?," September 18, 2023.

⁷⁶ "Remote Working Laws & Regulations in the Netherlands," CMS Law.Tax, n.d.

⁷⁷ Lee Min Hui and Sofea Azahar, "Centring Women's Work and Care at Core of Recovery," in Where Do We Go Work-Wise? Malaysia's Labour Landscape (Talent Corporation Malaysia Berhad, 2023).

possibility of a higher subsidy for households falling below a specific income threshold.⁷⁸ The International Labour Organization (ILO) underscores the importance of governments increasing public investment in childcare to improve quality, accessibility, and affordability, aligning with a broader recognition of childcare as a shared societal responsibility.⁷⁹

06 Accelerating the formulation of a comprehensive National Ageing Blueprint.

Women however bear not only the primary responsibility of childcare but also the caregiving duties for the elderly. Malaysia is on the trajectory to becoming an ageing nation by 2030, expecting 15% of its population to be aged 60 years and above.⁸⁰ The development of the National Ageing Blueprint should be a top national priority. Drawing inspiration from Singapore's Action Plan for Successful Ageing in 2023, which is built on three pillars—care, contribution, and connectedness—Malaysia has an opportunity to create a comprehensive framework.⁸¹ This plan empowers seniors to actively manage their well-being, with notable frameworks like the



Caregiver Support Action Plan enhancing caregiver support through initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, centralising information on caregiving, and various financial aid to offset caregiving costs.⁸² The comprehensive nature of Singapore's plan positions it one of the blueprints for Malaysia to adopt.

⁷⁸ The Local Denmark, "How Does the Cost of Childcare in Denmark Compare to Other Countries?," The Local Denmark (The Local, September 27, 2022.)

⁷⁹ International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank, "Investments in Childcare for Gender Equality in Asia and the Pacific" (Geneva, 2023.)

⁸⁰ Free Malaysia Today (FMT), "Govt Coming up with National Ageing Blueprint, Says Deputy Minister," Free Malaysia Today (FMT), June 8, 2023.

⁸¹ CodeBlue, "Ageing Singapore Offers a Blueprint for Action - CodeBlue," CodeBlue, September 29, 2023.

⁸² Ministry of Health Singapore, "MOH | Caregiver Support," Moh.gov.sg, 2023.

B. ACROSS SECTORS: EQUALIZATION OF WOMEN

To rectify the persistent horizontal gender segregation in Malaysia's educational and employment landscape, initiatives aimed at equalising the number of women in education and the labour market should be prioritised. Recognizing and addressing the leaky pipeline phenomenon particularly in the Sciences is crucial. Policies challenging stereotypes and biases associated with academic disciplines to encourage girls' exploration of STEM fields from an early age must take centre stage.

01 Enhancing the National Policy for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NPSTI) 2021-2030 with a more specific and detailed strategy for augmenting the participation of women in STEM fields.

Presently, NPSTI outlines initiatives to boost women's participation and re-entry into the Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) workforce such as skill enhancement, supporting facilities and policies for women's re-entry into the workforce. However, there is room for improvement, particularly in addressing the persistent challenge of the leaky



pipeline phenomenon within the STEM sector. Therefore, a more targeted and specific approach is necessary. To enhance the strategy, specific measures like the development of educational initiatives and awareness programs in schools and early childhood, coupled with diversity training and seminars in workplaces can effectively tackle the formation of inherent biases and gender discrimination practices in the field.

02 Empowering existing Gender Focal Points (GFP) and Gender Focal Teams (GFT) across all public and private institutions.

One current government initiative aimed at mainstreaming gender into policy planning is the Gender Focal Teams (GFT) led by appointed Gender Focal Points within ministries and agencies. To ensure the GFT's impact, members must undergo comprehensive gender training. Additionally, selecting individuals of high rank for the GFP position is essential for their voices to carry weight. It is recommended that the government extends this



approach to the private sector, by establishing a gender sensitivity curriculum to enable organisations to establish their own Gender Focal Points and Teams. These teams in the private sector could be monitored by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development.

03 Incorporating within the Data Protection Act 2010 a legal mandate for pay transparency, alongside the prohibition of employers from requesting information regarding pregnancy and marital status.

The gender wage gap not only dissuades women from pursuing certain job opportunities but also perpetuates inequality for those who do enter the workforce. Women often face the discouraging reality that, even when securing a position, their compensation does not align with that of their

male counterparts. According to Section 5 of the Data Protection Act, data must be processed fairly and lawfully, highlighting the necessity for transparent pay practices. Additionally, Sections 7 and 8 of the Act emphasise that data subjects, including employees, have the right to be informed about the purpose of data processing and should have the option to consent or withhold consent. Therefore, a legal mandate under this Act will outlaw employers from asking personal matters such as marital status that will affect the hiring decision.


04 Instituting the **Gender Equality Bill.**

The imperative for the Gender Equality Bill becomes even more pronounced when considering the existing fragmented nature of gender-related legislation dispersed across various ministries, such as the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development and the Ministry of Human Resources. This bill could pave the way to the establishment of institutions dedicated to promoting gender equality such as a Gender Equality Commission and a Gender Equality Tribunal. A centralised approach facilitates a more holistic and integrated response to gender discrimination, aligning efforts across different sectors. This not only streamlines the legal framework but also reinforces the commitment to gender equality as a national priority rather than compartmentalising it within specific ministries.

⁶⁰ See figure 15

⁶¹ Hock Eam Lim, Judith Rich, and Mark N Harris, "Employment Outcomes of Graduates: The Case of Universiti Utara, Malaysia*," *Asian Economic Journal* 22, no. 3 (September 1, 2008) 321–41. .

⁶² See figure 10 & 11

A woman with braided hair, wearing a patterned top and a necklace, speaking at a podium. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The text is positioned to the right of the woman, starting from the middle of her face and extending down to her hands at the podium.

“GENDER MATTERS EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD. AND I WOULD LIKE TODAY TO ASK THAT WE BEGIN TO DREAM ABOUT AND PLAN FOR A DIFFERENT WORLD. A FAIRER WORLD. A WORLD OF HAPPIER MEN AND HAPPIER WOMEN WHO ARE TRUER TO THEMSELVES. AND THIS IS HOW TO START: WE MUST RAISE OUR DAUGHTERS DIFFERENTLY. WE MUST ALSO RAISE OUR SONS DIFFERENTLY.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*

Our research has unveiled significant insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Malaysian women as they navigate the intricate journey from university to the labour market. Particularly, our insights provide a nuanced understanding of the local context, enabling policymakers to formulate targeted and effective solutions to address gender inequality in the labour market.

Central to our findings is the recognition of the pivotal role played by family support in the lives of Malaysian women pursuing careers. Therefore, we emphasise the need for policies to consider the importance of family for the majority of Malaysian women allowing them to stove in both their professional aspirations and familial life. The prevailing societal expectations that often pressure women to prioritise family over career should be mitigated through thoughtful policy interventions. Our study advocates for the mainstreaming of family into policy, encouraging a departure from punitive measures that penalise women for their familial commitments. Instead, we propose the creation of an enabling environment that facilitates the harmonisation of work and family life for women. Policies that promote flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and supportive child care facilities can serve as instrumental tools in achieving this delicate balance.

Our research also confirms the enduring pattern of horizontal gender segregation, particularly in non-STEM fields. The mismatch between academic backgrounds and initial employment, as exemplified by the leaky pipeline phenomenon in the Sciences, points to systemic challenges that women face in pursuing and sustaining careers in STEM fields. While female engineering graduates fare relatively better in the job market, they still encounter challenges in male-dominated fields. Therefore, there is a crucial need to increase the effort towards challenging stereotypes and biases to encourage girls to explore STEM fields from an early age.

Furthermore, our research identifies two critical mediating factors in the university-to-labour force transition for Malaysian women: field of study and ethnicity. In crafting a comprehensive policy framework to address the intricate dynamics and career delays faced by women, we propose a multifaceted approach. Beyond measures aimed at enhancing the employability of Science graduates, there is an urgent need to delve into the labour market dynamics of STEM jobs. As Malaysia strives for high-income status, the persisting challenge of STEM graduates finding employment in unrelated sectors suggests a deeper issue within market dynamics.

A thorough market examination is essential to inform interventions that directly address these dynamics. Besides that, acknowledging the influence of ethnicity on job employment timelines is crucial. The compounding effect of job mismatch and ethnicity makes it harder for women to land a job in their desired field.

By aligning policies with the cultural and societal context specific to Malaysia, we can foster an inclusive workforce that accommodates the unique needs and aspirations of women. This localised approach does not negate the broader global context but rather, serves as a model for crafting solutions that are both contextually relevant and globally resonant.

Our study is limited due to lack of in-depth qualitative data. Quantitative methods, while providing broad trends and statistical significance, may fall short in capturing the nuanced and intricate facets of individuals' lived experiences. Therefore, future research could benefit significantly from incorporating qualitative, in-depth interviews. Such a qualitative approach would allow for a more profound exploration of the intricacies, motivations, and constraints that shape the decisions of women. Moreover, our study did not consider respondents' marital status which would have provided insights on the specific impacts of marriage and motherhood on career progression. We acknowledge the importance of including this aspect in future research.

As we conclude, we hope that our research findings will serve as a guiding compass in the formulation of progressive and equitable policies. Our aspiration is that the nuanced insights and recommendations presented in this study will not only inform decision-makers but also inspire tangible actions that empower women in Malaysia.