The Productive and Non-(Re) productive Women: Sites of Economic Growth in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper is a critical revisit of the New Economic Policy and the New Population Policy of Malaysia. It attempts to inspect how a woman’s body (fertility) and her labor has been the site or location from which the economic growth of the country was dependent on but has never been recognized. The paper examines women’s contribution in the economy and their contribution to the economic growth of Malaysia. These contributions and changes were plotted against the changes in the policy domain with a focus on the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the New Population Policy (NPP) to see if there was any relationship between them. The paper also discusses that women have not always responded in line with policy calls especially in relation to their fertility but they have contributed significantly in the structural changes of the Malaysian economy. These responses are examined as a form of gender struggle within a fragmented and contradictory policy domain and within the context of very little gender equity/equality concerns in society and the policy domain. How these responses contributed in real terms to economic development and the overall growth of the country but with insignificant distributive effect for women contrary to the New Economic Policy’s claim is critically analyzed in this paper.

Key words

productive work, reproductive work, fertility, population policy, affirmative action policy, economic growth

Introduction

The question of population and development is fundamental to the economic growth of a country. Population and development issues and policies are usually discussed in a variety of competing voices be it politi-
cal, moral, economic, demographic and social. The voices of women are the least audible in these discussions. At the heart of many national concerns about population and development stand the women almost always represented as being prepared to do her duty for the state. Within many population and development debates, a common theme - the reduction of women’s bodies and labor to the status of national resource appears again and again. But women have not always responded in line with policy calls especially in relation to their fertility. How this contributed in real terms to economic development and the overall growth of the country is something that is not analyzed and always neglected. This paper looks at how women’s body and her labor has been the site or location from which much of the growth of the country was dependent on but has never been recognized. This paper will examine the way policies that have an impact on women in terms of their labour force participation and the decline in fertility have been critical to Malaysia’s economic growth. These transformations are usually associated with the changes in the role of women. The image of the productive women who chooses to control their reproductive capacity is often perceived and viewed negatively although they have contributed to the development and economic growth of the country. Policies encouraging increased female labour force participation and increased pressure to conform to the demands of the traditional family and the demands of the state to reproduce for the human resource and industrialization needs of the country - exist in a rather paradoxical way within the export-oriented economy of Malaysia. The complex inter-relationships of policies and choices and its consequences on the country’s economic growth will be analyzed.

Revisiting the New Economic Policy and the New Population Policies

Initiatives and efforts in economic and social development in Malaysia began with the implementation of the country’s First Five Year Plan (1956-1960). This and the subsequent economic plans focused on sustaining economic growth, infrastructure development, diversification of agriculture and industrial development. The New Economic Policy which was launched in 1971 had a two-pronged strategy of eradicating poverty and restructuring society so as to eliminate the identification of race and economic functions. It also involved affirmative action for the Malays to re-
duce inter-ethnic economic differences. The New Economic Policy objectives could only be achieved if there was a sustained economic growth and these the government planned to achieve through an increased public sector expenditure and based on export-oriented industrialization. This encouraged the urban-ward migration of young rural Malay women into the manufacturing sector.

None of the development Plans under the New Economic Policy which ended in 1990, gave any attention to issues and strategies for the advancement of women until the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995) under the new National Development Policy with another ten-year Second Outline Prospective Plan from 1991-2000. It emphasized growth led by the private sector rather than by the public sector and focused on human resource development to achieve distributional objectives. Government initiatives and policies to increase Foreign Direct Investment led to the coming of Multinational Corporations into the country which provided employment. Most analyses of this have shown how cheap female labour was important for the growth of the manufacturing sector.

The government formulated the New Population Policy with the intention to supply the labour needed for the industrialization project but at the same time encouraged female labour force participation for immediate supply of labour. The contradiction of consequences of the two policies will be discussed later on in this article. In Malaysia, an explicit national population policy was first pronounced in the First Malaysia Plan 1966-1970, and the Family Planning Act of 1966 was passed. In line with the launching of the national heavy industrialization program, the New Population Policy (NPP) was implemented in 1984. Thus the NPP marks a fundamental shift in Malaysia’s population policy from anti-natalism in the 1960s to the current perceived pro-natalism. Although the NPP was implemented on a voluntary basis, subsequent revisions in income tax rebates and maternity leave have been seen as incentives towards childbearing. Some of these changes such as the scope of tax relief not being limited to five children and maternity leave being increased from the first three children to five children after 1984 were considered to be the pro-natalist measures taken by the government. The Malays were found to be more responsive to the NPP. We can analyze these as the overriding power of developmental needs of the industrialization programs of Malaysia. However, overall fertility after the mid 1980s began