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9.1 Persisting inequality, bounded inclusion

Since the early 1990s, the Malaysian government has substantively recognised the importance of women to national development. The Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995), for the first time in planning history, included a standalone chapter entitled "Women in Development". Prior to this, women had already been contributing to growth, initially as farmers and labourers in the rural economy, and then as assembly line workers in newly established electronics and textile and garments factories. The latter signalled the first time Malaysian women entered the workforce in large numbers, a trend that has continued till today. But from 1990 onwards, the proportion of women in manufacturing began to decline as more and more women migrated to jobs in wholesale and retail trade, hotels, and restaurants as well as the financial services sector (UNDP 2005; Thambiah 2010).

Evidence from other countries demonstrates the importance of women's work – paid and unpaid – not only in fuelling growth but, more critically perhaps, in keeping many households out of poverty. While similar studies do not exist for Malaysia, the fact that the government has continued to actively woo women to participate in the economy emphasises the crucial role they play. Certainly, other countries have understood that households and nations prosper when women's access to economic and financial resources improve (Heintz, 2006; Kabeer, 2009, 2012).

What is less clear is how women have participated in the processes of development, and how they have benefited from the ensuing economic growth. Few would dispute the success of Malaysia's prolonged and relatively high rates of growth, particularly up to the 1990s, or its continued annual growth of five to seven per cent in spite of the recent slowdown in the global economy. Nevertheless, as with other countries in Asia there have been concerns about the unevenness of this growth and the fact that it has led to rising income inequality. It is also clear that this has adversely impacted certain groups in society, some more than others (UNDP, 2010; Klassen, 2010; Gomez and Saravanamuttu, 2013).

This chapter evaluates the involvement of Malaysian women in national growth and the extent to which they have been rewarded for their efforts. It takes as its starting point the definition of "inclusive growth" forwarded at the outset (see Chapter 1) i.e. that there should be equality of opportunity – and access to this opportunity – to participate in the economy, and that the benefits of growth must be equitably distributed. From here, it will argue that while the government may encourage women to contribute to growth, there are structural impediments that prevent many from maximising their productive potential, including discriminatory practices and the absence of secure employment.

Consequently, it is no surprise that despite some gains, women in Malaysia as a whole still occupy the bottom of the employment hierarchy and, accordingly, continue to lag behind men where remuneration is concerned. In addition, many are found performing work that

\[\text{Arasoulid (1999, p.11), for example, argues that it was women's cheap labour that gave Southeast Asia's export industries a "competitive edge" in the global market.}\]