State of the Urban Poor Report 2015
Gender and Urban Poverty

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Malaysian Women in the Workforce and Poverty Eradication
Economic Growth with Equity

Shanthi Thambiah

In this chapter I wish to share Malaysia's experience in its attempt to attain growth with equity. I will show how women contributed to and benefited from economic growth. The growth and structural transformation of the Malaysian economy had widespread implications on the growth of employment opportunities as well as in the reduction of poverty. Sustained economic growth, in which poor women and men participate directly, as both agents and beneficiaries of that growth, is essential for reducing poverty. Employment is a critical avenue towards achieving pro-poor growth. Productive employment and decent work are the main routes out of poverty. Increasing the employability of poor people through education and skills development, especially for women and youth, unlocks their potential to contribute to the growth.

During the last couple of decades the international poverty agenda was dominated by arguments about the ways in which growth can and does lead to poverty reduction (Baulch 1996). As the 1990s progressed, we saw a major emphasis on labour-intensive, market-led growth as a pro-poor strategy for combining efficiency and equity concerns with social investment in education playing a critical role in poverty eradication (Eastwood and Lipson 2002; Sen 1999). Malaysia employed this strategy and has seen impressive results in poverty eradication. However, there has been criticism in this approach as a universal prescription for pro-poor growth (Baulch and Grant 1999; Demery and Walton 1997) and the critics suggest that the initial levels of economic inequality within countries are likely to determine the extent to which growth has pro-poor implications (Ferry et al. 2006).

In addition, education and employment has often been described (Tarabini 2010) as the most important link between economic growth and poverty reduction. Providing income earning opportunities through wage employment or self-employment for poor women is crucial to raising incomes and overcome poverty. However, currently women across the developing world enjoy limited access to fair and decent work compared to men.