

The Theory and Practice of Couples Managing Two Full-Time Careers in Malaysia

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Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Humanities**

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This thesis investigates the experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples combining career and family. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 23 dual-career couples. The findings indicate that being in a dual-career relationship impacts upon how they perceive the family's provider role; career priorities; how decisions are made; and how family work is divided. The experiences described by the participants reflect their gender role ideologies and the salience of family and work roles. The results also reveal how interaction between partners can shape their ideologies and role salience, in addition to how religious and cultural values influence their gender attitudes. A number of challenges faced by the couples are identified. The supports and strategies that help them cope with housework, childcare and work demands are also critiqued. The thesis also highlights the implications of the government and organization's policies and support to the couples and the kind of policies and support that the couples would like to see introduced. The similarities and differences between dual-career couples in the Malaysian context compared with the West are explored. Additionally, the findings extend the use of gender role ideology and role salience theories to develop an understanding of the couples' experiences. A summarizing framework of their experiences based on the analysis is presented.

In summary, the thesis firstly fills a gap in the dual-career couples' literature which has previously focused upon Western couples only. Secondly, the study has examines the utility of gender role ideology and role salience as a framework to understand the context of dual-career couples. Thirdly, the current research also makes an important methodological contribution in a Malaysian context. Finally, it provides some recommendations for the government and organizations in Malaysia in terms of policies that promote work-family balance and gender equality for dual-career women.

Introduction

This thesis investigates the experiences of dual-career couples combining career and family in Malaysia, using the frameworks of gender role ideology and role salience. This introductory chapter describes the rationale for conducting this study, including the importance of the topic of dual-career couples before providing a brief overview of some of the limitations of previous research in this area. Following this, an introduction to the current research and the research questions that guided it will be presented. Finally, the chapter will outline how the thesis is organised and what is to come in the subsequent chapters.

1.1 Why Dual-Career Couples?

Over recent decades, the growth of women's participation in the labour force has been one of the most significant and prominent features of developed countries. It has been recorded that 65.1 per cent of all women aged between 20 and 64 in the United States (US), 67.9 per cent in the United Kingdom (UK) and 62.3 per cent in the European Union (EU) were in employment (Eurostat, 2012). The steady increase of women's participation in the workforce has changed simultaneously the family structures of the once traditional pattern of male breadwinner and female homemaker, and marks the rise of dual-career couples in which both spouses share a family life whilst having careers. It represents a relatively new family structure that deviates from established societal norms with regards to division of labour, gender and family life (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005; Lease, 2003). Women's roles are no longer confined to family and home-keeper roles, and men are no longer the sole breadwinners in the family (Abele & Volmer, 2011).

For dual-career couples, work and life are intertwined. Despite mutual compensations, the demands of careers in tandem can generate conflict and stress, which are compounded when couples have children or other family responsibilities (Smith, 1997). Careers with heavy workloads, inflexibility, long working hours or frequent travel affect the quality time available for the family (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Juggling an increasingly demanding career and a busy home life inevitably involves compromise, particularly for women. As career and family tensions are thrust into high relief, they have important implications for organizations too, since conflicts are transferred inevitably from home to work and vice versa (Linehan and

Walsh, 2001; Smith, 1997). Considering the widespread of dual-career couples and the conflict and challenges facing them, many researchers have taken interest in studying the context for couples combining career and family in relation to various aspects, such as the provider role, career priority, division of household work and childcare, as well as organizational expectations and their impacts.

1.2 Limitations of Previous Research

In examining the context of dual-career couples, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between gender and work-family conflict, as well as the nature and pace of change in gender roles associated with the growth of dual-career couples, differ across nations due to specific cultural values (Bianchie & Milkie, 2010; Lewis, et al. 1992). Furthermore, recent studies (e.g Cha & Thebaud, 2009; Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2007) have revealed that cultural variables, such as gender role and political and economic factors, influence an individual's work-family experiences. Thus, examining the work-family experience of dual-career couples in light of such cultural norms and values may contribute to a better understanding of differences and similarities in work-family relationships across different cultural groups (Bowes, 2005; Karimi, 2009; Korabik et al., 2003; Shafiro & Hammer, 2004). In addition, this knowledge will contribute to the development of better policies and practices at the national level as well as for practitioners, consistent with the increased globalization and growing number of multinational corporations (Shafiro & Hammer, 2004).

The majority of works on dual-career couples have been conducted in the US and Western countries¹ (Elloy & Smith, 2003; Rusconi, 2002; Shafiro & Hammer, 2004). Attempts to examine the dynamics of this family model across cultures, especially in developing countries, are generally lacking, despite the fact that the dynamics of work-family have also changed in these countries (Karimi, 2009; Quek & Knudson Martin, 2008). Taking these factors into account, the present research sets out to investigate the work-family experiences of dual-career couples in Malaysia. Malaysia has experienced a significant increase in the number of women entering paid work and this increase is expected to be continued because

¹ In the contemporary cultural meaning, the Western countries includes Europe, as well as many countries of European colonial origin with majority European populations in the Americas and Oceania, such as the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Thompson & Hickey, 2005).

of the greater educational opportunities that contribute to women's career aspirations, as well as the growing financial needs that increase the desire for a double income in many families (Abdullah et. al., 2008; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008). In this country, however, there have been very few empirical investigations related to dual-career couples. Studies that have been conducted focused only on the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict (e.g Komarraju, 2006; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008). Furthermore, literatures in Malaysia seem to focus more on working women, compared with investigation that includes both men and women in dual-career marriages (e.g; Abdullah et al., 2008; Hashim, 2004; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Noor, 1999; Noor & Mahudin, 2005). To date, no studies have explored Malaysian dual-career husbands' perceptions of their home and work balance. Hence, it was deemed appropriate to examine the context for couples combining career and family in Malaysia.

1.3 Introducing the Current Research

This thesis employs a qualitative methodology. Given the dearth of available literature on this particular population and the need to explore various views and experiences of dual-career couples, the study utilised semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both husbands and wives in dual-career couples. The study is carried out under the assumption of an interpretive paradigm, which assumes that people create and associate their own subjective and inter-subjective meanings as they interact with the world around them (Orlikowski & Baroudi 1991). This approach views that there are always multiple interpretations to be made of any phenomenon, which depend upon the position of the researcher and the context of the research (King, 2004). Thus, it is appropriate to use interpretive approach in this study since it seeks to gain understanding of the couples' experiences and challenges from their own point of view.

The study focuses on Malay couples since they represent the largest ethnic group (54.6%) of the population in this country (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). For the Malays, religious beliefs and cultural values play important roles in their lives and therefore, there has existed traditional gendered norms with regards to women's role in society. The culture insists that a woman has to take care of her husband's overall well-being and those who are filial to her husband would receive great accolades from society (Noor & Mahudin, 2005). The roles of women have also been described as to manage the household affairs and to be a wife, a mother and caretaker of the family (Ariffin, 1997). Accordingly, women are exposed

to a series of teachings on womanly virtues and prepared meticulously by their mothers to assume and continue these cultural roles (Noor & Mahudin, 2005). Such traditional norms, however, have been weakened in accompanying with rapid economic growth and modernization, especially among young couples (Abdullah et al., 2008). Considering all these complexities, the case study of Malaysian dual-career couples adds to the literature on dual-career couples in general, and in Malaysia in particular, by providing valuable insights into their experiences in the workplace and in the family domain as a result of being in a dual-career relationship.

The study adopts gender role ideology and role salience as its theoretical foundation. Gender role ideology has been used extensively as the framework to examine the context of dual-career couples in a particular country (e.g Gonzalez-Lopez, 2001; Hendrickx et al., 2001; Lewis, et al. 1992; Rusconi, 2002). Gender roles are those behaviours and attitudes prescribed and assigned to males and females by the broader culture solely on the basis of gender (Bartley et al., 2005). Women and men vary in their individual views concerning appropriate behaviours for the sexes in the paid work and family domain (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007). Conceptually, gender role orientation is seen as ranging on a continuum from traditional to non-traditional. Traditional roles are those that see the roles of men and women as distinct and separate, whereas non-traditional gender role orientation is characterized by role sharing between men and women (Ahmad, 1999). From this perspective, this thesis investigates the gender role ideology of Malaysian couples in regards to their family roles, whether there has been movement towards a less traditional gender role attitude in their family roles and explore how variations in their personal characteristics might affect their attitude. This perspective also guides the investigation concerning the influence of macro and micro-factors on the couples' ideology, as well as on Government and organizational policies and arrangements. In addition, it provides the basis for investigating the consequences of gender role ideology displayed by the government and employed by organizations on the couples' experiences at work and in the family.

Furthermore, in order to build a more comprehensive structure to assess the context of dual-career couples in Malaysia, this present research expands the theoretical framework by adding another perspective; namely, role salience. In this perspective, people are viewed as being engaged with various roles, and role salience denotes the relative importance or "the degree to which a given role stands out from others played" (Super, 1982). One pivotal aspect of role salience is its influence on how people will fulfil their responsibilities in family and

organizational roles. Cinamon and Rich (2002) have demonstrated the importance of examining the relative salience of both work and family roles to understand work-family conflicts and challenges. Role salience impacts peoples' behaviour and decisions regarding their roles as employees and, therefore, has meaningful implications for employees and organizations (Greer and Egan, 2012). Saliency concerning the different roles that individuals enact in society is particularly suited as a framework for examining the conflict between work and family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003); hence, it would be suitable for this thesis. The present study extends the use of the two perspectives in examining the context of couples by exhibiting its utility in understanding the Malaysian couples' experiences and the factors that impact them. Moreover, the combination of these two perspectives as the theoretical framework is effective in highlighting the interaction between macro and micro-factors in influencing the participants' gender role attitude and role salience, which, in turn, affects their perceptions and experiences at work and in the family.

Thus, using the theoretical frameworks of gender role ideology and role salience, the research aims to provide a comprehensive and detailed study of the experiences of Malay dual-career couples in Malaysia in combining careers and family. The four specific objectives are:

- 1) To generate a unique set of empirical data that enables the comparison of the perspectives of both husbands and wives in understanding their experiences of combining careers and family.
- 2) To provide a comparison between the perceptions and experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples and dual-career couples in the West in relation to the challenges of and support to combining careers and family life.
- 3) To examine the utility of gender role ideology and role salience as theoretical frameworks in understanding the experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples and the factors that impact their perceptions and experiences.
- 4) To suggest recommendations for organizations and policy makers regarding the best ways to enhance couples' work and family balance that encourages role sharing between dual-career husbands and wives.

To achieve the above mentioned objectives, the research seeks to answer the questions of:

- 1) What perceptions do dual-career couples have of the provider role and career priority in the family?
- 2) What is the pattern of decision making and division of family work among Malaysian couples?
- 3) Is traditional gender role ideology among Malaysian couples changing?
- 4) What are the problems and challenges faced by the dual-career couples in Malaysia?
- 5) What are the coping strategies and supports employed by couples to overcome these problems and challenges?
- 6) What are the implications of the Government and organization's policies and support for the couples?
- 7) What kind of policies and support would the couples like to see introduced?
- 8) To what extent are the perceptions and experiences identified in the Malaysian context similar to those identified in Western literature?
- 9) How does the gender role ideology that underpins government and organizational policies impact the couples' experiences at work and in the family?
- 10) What are the factors that affect the Malaysian couples' gender role ideologies and role salience?
- 11) How does the interplay of gender role ideology and role salience explain the couples' experiences?

Research examining work and family experiences of dual-career couples across cultures will not only enrich literature in this area but will also provide practitioners with knowledge about universal and culturally-specific work-family experiences that should help employees and employers operate in a multicultural environment. Furthermore, by linking two different theoretical perspectives, this study aims to show their utility in examining the context of couples and providing a comprehensive framework that is effective in scrutinizing the complexities of their entwined lives. Interviewing both couples and incorporating couple-level analysis apart from individual-level analysis, also bring a new methodological approach to the Malaysian context and present a valuable method to describe the dynamics and the interplay of gender role attitude and role salience in their life. Finally, for practical purposes, this research will suggest some recommendations for the government and organizations in Malaysia, particularly in terms of human resource policies and support that would enhance



work-family balance and promote more role-sharing between dual-career husbands and

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1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is structured in the following way:

The following chapter, **Chapter 2**, reflects on the context of the study. In this chapter, a brief introduction will be provided to the country's background. There will also be a discussion on the position of women in Malaysia, the impact of culture and the efforts made by the government to support the participation of women in the workforce.

Chapter 3 discusses previous works on dual-career couples, mainly those that have been done in Western countries; while **Chapter 4** reviews literatures on gender role ideology and role salience, which are used as the theoretical foundation for the study.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodological approach of the research. It explains the methodological foundation, research instrument, research sample, research process and ethical considerations of the present study. This chapter also explicates the analysis of the data.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present the findings of the study drawing on data from the interviews. The findings are divided into three chapters that focus on answering the research questions. **Chapter 6** concerns the impact of dual-career relationship on the family. This includes their perception in terms of provider role and career priority in the family, and the pattern of decision making for the division of family work among the couples. **Chapter 7** highlights the problems and challenges encountered by couples and discusses the coping strategies and supports that they utilize to help them overcome the challenges. **Chapter 8** reveals the implication of the Government and organization's policies and support for the couples. Recommendations for policies and supports, as proposed by the couples, are also presented in this chapter.

The findings are elaborated in relation to the theoretical frameworks that guide the investigation. Hence, these chapters describe the couples' gender role attitude and role salience, and point out how being dual-career couples affects their gender role attitude and role salience. It also discusses the interplay of gender role ideology and role salience in explaining the couples' experiences in combining career and family.



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Chapter 9 discusses the findings in more detail and presents a comparison between the experiences of Malaysian couples with previous studies on dual-career couples, particularly in the West. There is also a discussion on the gender role ideology that underpins the government and organizational policies, and their impact on the couples' experience. Additionally, this chapter discusses the factors that affect the Malaysian couples' gender role ideologies and role salience, and presents a summarizing framework of the couples' perceptions and experiences based on the chosen theoretical perspectives.

The final chapter, **Chapter 10**, draws conclusions and discusses the contributions of the study. It also discusses its limitations and offers recommendations for future research.



Chapter 2

This chapter identifies the research context. In order to understand the work and family experiences of dual-career couples in Malaysia, it is only appropriate to begin by examining the position of working men and women in Malaysia. The first section of this chapter will provide a brief introduction to the country's background. This will be followed by a discussion on the position of women in the country, which includes a discussion about their background, followed by an examination of the factors that have contributed towards the huge employment opportunities for Malaysian women, as well as the patterns and characteristics of women in the labour force. The next section will highlight the impact of culture on gender identities of working women in Malaysia, which is essential as cultural norms may influence Malaysian women's experiences and attitudes in the family and in organizations. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, although the Malaysian society comprised three major ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian), this chapter will focus only on the consequences of being Malay since they represent the largest ethnic group in Malaysian society. Furthermore, given the absence of qualitative data gained from dual-career men in this country, it is considered appropriate to concentrate on the most dominant ethnic group first, since other ethnic groups may have different experiences due to differences in culture and religion. The final section of this chapter will scrutinise the efforts by Malaysian government to support and encourage the participation of women in the labour force, which contribute consequently to the rise of dual-career couples in Malaysia.

2.1 The Background of Malaysia

Malaysia, a country located at the heart of South-East Asia, consists of two distinct geographical segments separated by the South China Sea, which are Peninsular (or West) Malaysia and East Malaysia. Prior to 1963, Malaysia was known as Malaya and achieved its independence from the British on 31st August 1957. The modern state of Malaysia was formed in 1963, consisting of Malaya, Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak. In 1965, Singapore left Malaysia to become an independent Republic. The nation now is made up of 13 states, 11 of which are in Peninsular Malaysia with the remaining two (Sabah and Sarawak) in East Malaysia. Of the 13 states, nine are descended from the original Malay *Sultanate* (or monarchy) and are headed by hereditary rulers. The remaining four states are headed by *Yang diPertua Negeri* (or governors), who are appointed for fixed terms of office (Saw, 2007).

The country has a total land area covering 330, 803 square kilometres and is populated primarily by Malays, Chinese and Indians, as well as some minority indigenous groups called 'Bumiputra' (The Economic Planning Unit, 2012). Today, the Malays and the Bumiputra account for nearly 67.4 per cent of the total population of 28.9 million people. The Chinese account for 24.6 per cent and the Indians represent 7.3 per cent of the total population, while 0.7 per cent comes from other ethnic groups (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). Malays are considered to include those adopting Malay language and customs, and those who are Muslim. It is, thus, an umbrella term covering a number of distinct ethnic groups: Buginese, Javanese, Malays, Minangkabau and others. The other Bumiputeras consist of a number of groups including the Negrito; Senoi, in Peninsular Malaysia; the Bajau, Dusun and Kadazan in Sabah; and the Bidayuh, Iban and Melanau in Sarawak. The main Chinese speech groups are Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien, Khek and Zeochew. The main Indian subgroups are Tamil, Malayali and Punjabi. In addition, there is number of Indonesians, Thai, Filipinos and other groups. The ethnographic mix of Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia) and Sabah and Sarawak (East Malaysia) differs within and between each region with the kaleidoscope of cultural manifestations that it implies (Ahmad, 1998; The Economic Planning Unit, 2012). Because there are many different cultures that co-exist, Malaysia is considered a pluralist state (Esposito, 1987). Although each of these cultures has dynamically maintained its traditions and community structures, they have also mixed together to create modern Malaysia's uniquely diverse heritage (Manaf, 2009).

Malaysia is known in the surrounding region as a fast developing country; bringing economic prosperity and a better quality of life to its people (Ariffin, 1997). The modernization of Malaysia is equated to industrialization and urbanization. Economic liberalization is causing changes to the social values of Malaysian people. Thus, this country presents an interesting case to study about the experiences of dual-career couples, since it is a society that has undergone significant industrialization and urbanization but, at the same time, the traditional structure of family life based on religious and cultural norms is still widespread.

2.2 Women in Malaysia

In this country, women make up half of the population (14.03 million women) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). Since 1970, women have made significant progress into the paid labour force, from 36% to 48.8 % in 2012 (The Economic Planning Unit, 2012). Factors that contributed towards this increase were the huge investment in educational facilities

accompanied by the provision for equal access to educational opportunities, the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) by the government in 1971 as well as the rapid development and industrialization, which created more jobs opportunity for women.

Employment opportunities, indeed, have changed Malaysian women's role and attitudes towards work. From a historical perspective, in the pre-colonial period, women usually worked alongside their husbands in subsistence agriculture (Noor, 1999). The women were also confined to domestic spheres and took care of the reproductive roles; namely, bearing children, and looking after the home, husband and children (Hong, 1983). With colonialism, labour became an economic commodity and subsistence production was no longer stressed. The men worked in paid employment and the women stayed at home to tend to the family; thus, the traditional gender roles were born (Noor, 1999). Men were defined as "head of the household" with the right to family assets and property, and entitlements to the government agricultural programmes and subsidies (Hong, 1983). Until the 1960s, a commonly-held belief was that women are ideally suited to being housewives and, when educated, they should work as teachers, nurses or in similar "feminine" occupations (Koshal et al., 1998). However, since 1970, changes brought about by industrialization have resulted in many job opportunities in urban areas; hence, many families migrated for employment reasons. Therefore, in many families both husband and wife now work, making employed spouses a common type of family in Malaysia (Hashim & Omar 2004).

As mentioned previously, several factors such as education and economy have contributed to the significant increase of women in the labour force. Hence, the next section will discuss in more detail the factors that influence the progress of women in employment.

2.2.1 Factors Conducive to the Rise of Malaysian Women in the Workforce

2.2.1.1 Education

A main factor contributing to the economic and social advancement of women in Malaysia has been the equal access of women to educational opportunities. Malaysia has made a huge investment in educational facilities in order to provide education for its people. The current educational system in Malaysia is based on the spirit of the National Educational Policy and the New Economic Policy (Chiu, 2000). The National Educational Policy, introduced in 1961, establishes Bahasa Melayu as the national language and initially provided universal free education from primary level to Form 3 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 1990). Today,

Malaysia's education system includes six years of compulsory primary schooling and five years of secondary schooling (Pong, 1995). The efforts made by the government have generated a positive impact on women's education. In 2007, female students accounted for almost half of the total enrolments in primary and secondary schools whilst, at upper secondary level, female students outnumbered their male counterparts. Statistics showed that 86,180 females were enrolled, compared with only 46,115 male students (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2008).

Apart from schools, Malaysia also provides tertiary education in the form of public and private universities and colleges, which offer a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. It was reported that Malaysia has 20 government-funded universities and 600 private and university colleges offering almost 100,000 places annually for Malaysians to enter higher education (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012). Not surprisingly, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of females entering public universities in recent years. In 1970, for instance, female students accounted for only 29.1 per cent of the student population but, in 2011, the percentage of female students enrolled in first degree was more than 60 per cent (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012).

Table 2.1 below shows the enrolment of male and female students in public higher learning education for 2010 and 2011. It illustrates that there were more female students pursuing study in four levels of higher education compared with male students. Female students showed a huge enrolment at Bachelor degree and postgraduate diploma level in 2010, with a ratio of 62 per cent and 63 per cent respectively. Similarly, this trend continued in 2011, with female students comprising 62 per cent and 66 per cent of the students for Bachelor degrees and at postgraduate diploma level. Despite these tremendous achievements, female students are relatively low at PhD level. There were only 41 per cent and 43 per cent of female students pursuing PhDs, compared with 59 per cent and 57 per cent of male students in 2010 and 2011.

Table 2.1: Student Enrolment in Public Higher Learning Institutions by Level of Study

Level of Education	Male (M)		Female (F)		Total		Ratio (%) M:F	
	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011
Doctor of Philosophy	10,416	12,846	7,302	9,748	17,718	22,594	59:41	57:43
Master's Degree	21,620	22,226	28,056	31,041	49,676	53,267	44:56	42:58
Postgraduate Diploma	1,181	654	1,987	1,270	3,168	1,924	37:63	34:66
Bachelor Degree	103,483	112,273	171,207	186,906	274,690	299,179	38:62	38:62
Diploma	38,315	43,667	55,711	62,069	94,026	105,736	41:59	41:59

Source: Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012

The outstanding progress of Malaysian women in education has created opportunities for them to qualify into the labour force. Simultaneously, it has also changed the view of the Malaysian people to accept working women as a normative lifestyle, similar to many other industrialized countries.

2.2.1.2 Economy

The greater participation of women in the economy and the improved access to education were made possible by the rapid growth of the economy, which created greater and new opportunities for women. The expansion of this during the 1970s and 1980s is attributed generally to the pull of the manufacturing industry, due to the growth of electronics and garment industries, and expansion of export processing zones that began in the 1970s. The industrial expansion had a profound impact on the pattern of employment and rural-to-urban

migration, and drew unprecedented numbers of young, unmarried Malay women from villages to urban factories for the first time (Ahmad, 1998). In the 1990s, the manufacturing sector created about 0.6 million new jobs between 1990 and 1994 and, in 1994 alone, provided employment to 1.9 million people (Ministry of International Trade and Industry, 1995).

The manufacturing sector also became the leading sector that formed the highest share of employment, expanding from 16 per cent in 1980 to 31.7 per cent in 2005. This was due mainly to the outstanding growth in the manufacturing sector and its large contribution to the Growth Domestic Product (GDP). This time period also noted that over 50 per cent of the jobs created came from the manufacturing sector. Increases in job opportunities occurred in the electrical and electronics industries, along with other industries, such as garment, textiles and food processing, which were often labelled as “industrial feminisation” and the real sector that encouraged more women to participate in the labour-intensive industrial sector (Subramaniam, 2011).

2.2.1.2.1 The Effect of Economic Policy

In addition to economic development, there have been several policy changes affecting women’s employment in Malaysia. The NEP, launched in 1971, was designed to eradicate poverty, irrespective of ethnicity, and also tried to eliminate the identification of ethnicity with economic functions and geographical locations (Amin, 2004). It was incorporated into the Second Malaysian Plan of 1971-1975 and lasted for 20 years until 1990. The Government cited three forms of “economic imbalances” to be solved: (1) imbalances in income; (2) in employment; and (3) in ownership and control wealth. The NEP had definite targets for improving the socio-economic status of the Malays (Government of Malaysia, 1973). Under the NEP, the Government became the entrepreneur, engaging in massive expansion of the public sector enterprises and competing on behalf of Malays by utilising state capital to set up corporations, mostly in core utility businesses, such as transportation, communication and finance (Embong, 1998).

The result of this policy has benefited the Malaysian population, especially the rural Malay community in plantation and in business, because the government has provided low-interest loans and some incentives to help them descending their lives (Md.Shukri et al. 2009). During the NEP years, the country’s annual average growth rate was an impressive 6.7 per

cent, and the number of middle-class families doubled (Embong, 1998). Moreover, the launched of NEP also contributed to the rapid economic growth, which opened up new avenues of employment for women (Chattopadhyay, 1997).

The New Vision Policy (NVP), introduced under the Eight Malaysia Plan (2001-2005), was designed to plan the development of the nation for the first decade of the 21st century. The NVP incorporates the critical thrust of the NEP with a dominant objective of national unity. What interesting here is that, the NVP is guided by the strategic challenges of Vision 2020, which laid out the direction for Malaysia to become fully developed by 2020 (Government of Malaysia, 2001). One of the main ambitions of the government is to develop a knowledge-based economy as a strategic move to raise the value added of all economic sectors and optimising the brainpower of the nation. The shift from manufacturing-based to an information and service-based economy would be expected to benefit women's employment in professional and management position (Powell, 2000). In such an economy, "brain power" was likely to be more valued than "muscle power"; hence, increasing the demand for highly-educated employees (Schwartz, 1992). Indeed, such advantages have contributed to Malaysian women being given better work opportunities, as more and more women today are attaining better educational qualifications. At present, the services, manufacturing and agriculture sectors are the three top components of the Malaysian economy. The services sector was the largest contributor to the GDP with 58.6 per cent in 2011 (Malaysian Institute of Economic Research, 2012), as well as the largest employer of women in the workforce (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012).

2.2.2 Patterns and Characteristics of Women's Participation in the Labour Force

Economic growth has been accompanied by the greater participation of women in the formal workforce and in a range of other activities. At present, women's rate of participation in the labour force is 48.8 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012) while in the past decades their contribution steadily increased from 15 per cent in the 1950s and 1960s to 35 per cent in the 1970s and 1980s (Ariffin, 1997). However, in the past few years, this percentage has remained between 45 per cent and 48 per cent (see Figure 2.1), reflecting relatively slow growth. Hence, even though currently there are more women than men pursuing education at the tertiary level, this is not reflected in the labour force participation rate (Abdullah et al., 2008). The government claimed two factors contributed to the