

# **FAMILY POLICIES FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION IN ASIA WITH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Introduction**

There is remarkable diversity between countries in Asia in terms of the types of family policies implemented in these countries. Besides that Asia also covers a wide variety of cultures. Traditional family values are usually hailed as the source of social and economic regeneration but this moralistic pronouncement is contained within a recognition of other family forms. Thus family policies contain both an assurance to upholding the traditional family and an acceptance that the diversity of contemporary family forms demands a more pragmatic approach. Most Asian governments recognise the importance of the family however family issues are gradually declining in importance on the national and international development stage which requires country level obligations to ensure inclusive and equitable support to families with a focus on gender equality and empowerment in order to achieve the SDG goals.

The current policy focus are on social programs which are primarily at the individual level which conceals the reality of the majority of people's lives which is embedded in families. In Asia across different nationality, social classes and ethnic groups, individuals are located in a diversity of family relationships. The family can both protect and be detrimental to women's and girls' lives and well-being (Collin 1991; Trask 2015). It is therefore, of utmost importance that a gender perspective is brought into family policies at the formulation stage that integrates the SDG goals. It is through bringing a gender perspective into family policies that emphasizes gender equality where issues of social inclusion and social justice can be accomplished. This can help unpack the complex variety of targets in SDG 16 in terms of developing concrete initiatives and programs which otherwise might not be achieved.

## **Social Inclusion**

The politics of inclusion requires connecting the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition, which over time can create sustainable paths to democratic and social development, increasing the capacity of nations to handle conflicts arising from the unequal distribution of economic resources and livelihood opportunities as well as conflicts about identities.

Nancy Fraser (1997) has argued forcefully that justice today requires redistribution and recognition. She has proposed an analysis with two irreducible dimensions of justice – redistribution and recognition. Fraser's critical theory of recognition treats recognition as a question of equal social status: 'What requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of the group as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 1997). The point is that there is a real dilemma between an ideal about social equality based on socio-economic redistribution and an ideal of equity based on cultural recognition. Both conditions must be satisfied if

participatory parity is to be achieved. According to the general principle of participatory parity, democratic justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as peers (Fraser, 2003: 4). Fraser's three key concepts of redistribution, recognition and participation can be useful in our understanding of social inclusion.

Theoretically, the notion of social exclusion points to a shift in the conceptualisation of poverty from (extreme) class inequality and lack of resources to a broader insider/outsider problematic – that is, a change of focus in the poverty and inequality discourse from a vertical to a horizontal perspective. Andersen (1999) described it as a shift from a Marxist and Weberian notion of class (and status) analysis to a Durkheimian 'anomie/integration' discourse. Furthermore, Levitas (1996) notes, the danger of the inclusion/exclusion discourse when it is narrowed to labour market participation and may thus obscure the fact that the positions in which people are 'integrated' through paid work can be extremely unequal.

Exclusion conversely is a process and a state resulting in lack of access to full participation in mainstream society. The manifestations of social exclusion are often understood differently according to the perceived needs of the society. For example, in some societies, women may be the main excluded group, in other societies, immigrants or ethnic minorities are excluded. A gender perspective may potentially enrich the social exclusion approach by referring to specific, gender-based risks and vulnerabilities, but the social exclusion approach does not translate easily into a discourse on women (Daly and Saraceno, 2002: 101). Feminist theory and comparative research often prefer the citizenship framework, which emphasises the double inclusion/exclusion of women in the labour market and in politics in order to explain the specific position of women and gender inequality within and across societies (Hobson, Lewis and Siim, 2002). It is important to understand the processes through which individuals or groups are excluded, as promotion of inclusion can only be possible by tackling exclusion.

The question now is how to make the concept of social inclusion operational. The challenge for policy makers is to be realistic and find ways to detach the concept of social inclusion from the utopian realm of a "perfectly inclusive" society by seeing it as a practical tool - as a legal principle, a societal goal, and eventually, practice. Social inclusion, as an all-encompassing goal as well as a multi-dimensional practice can play an important role in promoting sustainable human development.

There are different understandings of integration in terms of how a socially inclusive society functions. "Integration in all its forms may simply imply the existence of a stable community in which people can find a niche" (Taylor, 2007:3). This simple expression is at the heart of the definition of social integration and social inclusion, which is: difference among members of society is acceptable and that social integration or social inclusion does not mean a uniformity of people but a society which has room for diversity and still fosters engagement. To achieve social integration and social inclusion, voices of people and their needs and concerns, need to be heard from all members of society with different backgrounds where all must have a say and a stake in their shared society. This inclusiveness of society creates and maintains stability, justice and peace as well as a readiness to embrace change when necessary.

### **Gender Perspective**

The lack of gender equality with respect to economic, social, educational and employment opportunities continues despite the commitments and efforts of governments in Asia to this

issue. The unequal relationship between men and women, remains rooted in cultural norms and social relationship (Kabeer 2005). Feminist scholars have criticized mainstream analyses of inequality and welfare states for their neglect of gender aspects (Fraser 1989; Gordon 1990; Leira 1992; Lewis 1997; O'Connor 1993, 1996; Pateman 1988; Siim 1988; Williams 1995). They argued that gender is one of the important factors that must be considered in analyses of inequality and welfare states. Yet few if any of them maintain that gender should replace factors such as class, race, and ethnicity in the study of distributive processes. Instead there seems to be a growing consensus that gender as well as class, ethnicity, and race are all socially constructed and that each of them must be brought into the analysis without excluding the others (e.g., O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). A focus on gender inequality highlights additional dimensions of the division of labor in society, divisions between production and reproduction, between paid and unpaid work. Thus it points to the importance of distinguishing between, on the one hand, inequality in terms of manifest achievements of well-being and, on the other hand, inequality in terms of freedom to achieve.

Analyses of the role of gender in distributive processes brings a worthwhile unit of analysis to the fore which is the family and the household which are typically taken as basic observational units. Unlike class and ethnicity, the gender dimension thus constantly cuts through the family and draws attention to the role of intra family differentiation in distributive processes.

### **Some Areas Needing a Gender Perspective on Family Policies in Asia**

In the past few decades, societies in Asia have experienced rapid and dramatic changes in their economic, social, demographic and political spheres. Given their wide diversity, it is understandable that the manifestation, extent and impact of these changes vary from country to country. Nevertheless, a few general trends can be observed. The following are areas that need targeting in family policies in a selection of countries in Asia:

#### ***Declining fertility***

Industrialization and urbanization have had an impact on demographics and family structures. The declining fertility rate has been recognized as a defining feature of a modern society, leading to small families and reducing instances of multi-generational co-residency.

Region	1990	2000	2010
East Asia			
China	2.3	1.7	1.6
Hong Kong	1.3	1.0	1.2
Korea	1.6	1.5	1.2
Taiwan	1.8	1.7	1.1
Japan	1.5	1.4	1.4
South Asia			
Sri Lanka	2.5	2.2	2.3
Southeast Asia			
Philippines	4.3	3.8	3.1
Malaysia	3.3	3.4*	2.2

\*1995

Source: United Nations Population Division, 2013  
For Malaysia – Thambiah 2010

Table 1 above shows fertility in a selection of countries in Asia. Fertility decline began in Japan much earlier than the other countries and reached replacement level by the 1970s.

The fertility rates in Singapore, Korea and Taiwan declined rapidly in the 1960s and the most rapid decline in China was in the 1970s and 1980s. As for China, many studies have shown that the famous ‘one-child policy’ introduced in 1978 has been overstated with much of the decline seen from the late 1980s which was mainly driven by economic development and urbanisation (Wang et. al. 2013). Furthermore, the mean age of first birth has increased dramatically in most countries due to better access to education for females and the increase in mean age at first marriage. Given the link between marriage and fertility the impact of delayed marriages can be linked to declines in fertility (Jones 2007). Besides that the Asian ‘flight from marriage’ for women is being observed in several Asian countries (Jones 2012). In addition crude divorce rates also grew steadily and significantly a larger percentage of divorces are those that involve children (Yoon-Jeong Shin et. al.2014).

There is in general a preference for two-child family and this ‘unmet need’ for children could provide a space in which policies could be implemented to support childbearing (Philipov 2009). This unmet need was observed for Japan (Suzuki 2003), for Korea (Kim 2003), Singapore (Yap 2009). So the fertility decline observed should be explained as not just the choice of couples but the existence of barriers to fulfilling that need. So for these advanced Asian countries as stated by McDonald (2013) that they are in a ‘low-fertility trap’.

Policy initiatives – are in the form of cash benefits to child rearing households and there are three types cash benefits:

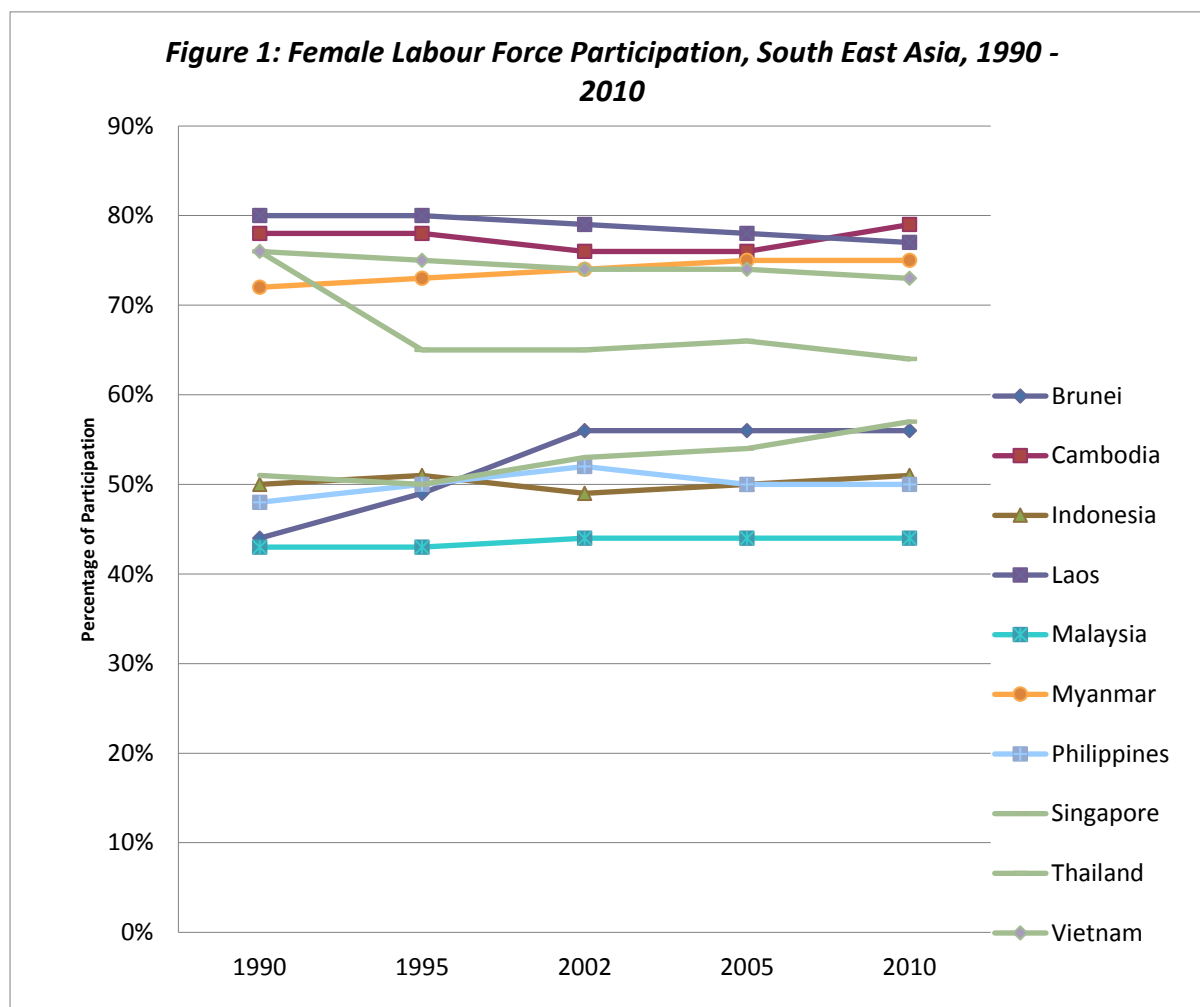
- i. Universal support (Japan – child allowance)
- ii. Non-universal but expanded support (Korea and Singapore’s baby bonus)
- iii. Support for underprivileged children (China, Hong Kong, Malaysia)

Although these policies aim at social inclusion of children through cash benefits but its redistributive role have minimal impact on gender equality and its outcome for fulfilling the ‘unmet need’ for children will not be achieved due to its lack of a gender perspective in the policy domain.

### **Female Employment and the Family**

The economic development in Asian countries has involved a reduction of the role of the agricultural sector and a growth in industrialization, and, for some advanced economies, the growth of the service sector. The female employment rate in most East-Asian countries, is on the rise since the 1990s. The countries that show a relatively high female employment rate since 2010 include some developing countries, such as Vietnam, China and Thailand. The reason for the relatively high employment rate among women is because a large number of women in those countries still engage in the traditional agriculture or informal sectors (Yoon-Jeong Shin et. al.2014).

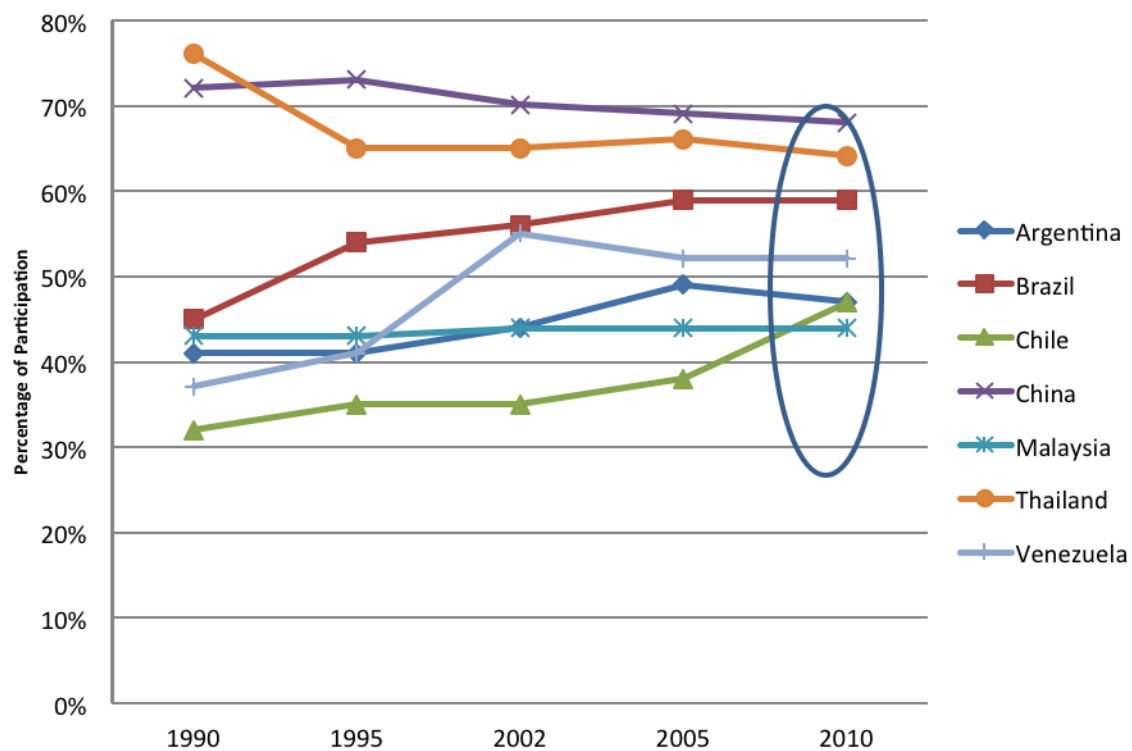
The 2011 female labor force participation rate of 47.9% in Malaysia is the lowest among all ASEAN member states ( ILO, 2008). Brunei and Singapore which are high income countries in ASEAN show upward trends of female labour force participation rates. Thailand which is an upper middle income country in Southeast Asia has about a 20% higher female labour force participation rate compared to Malaysia.



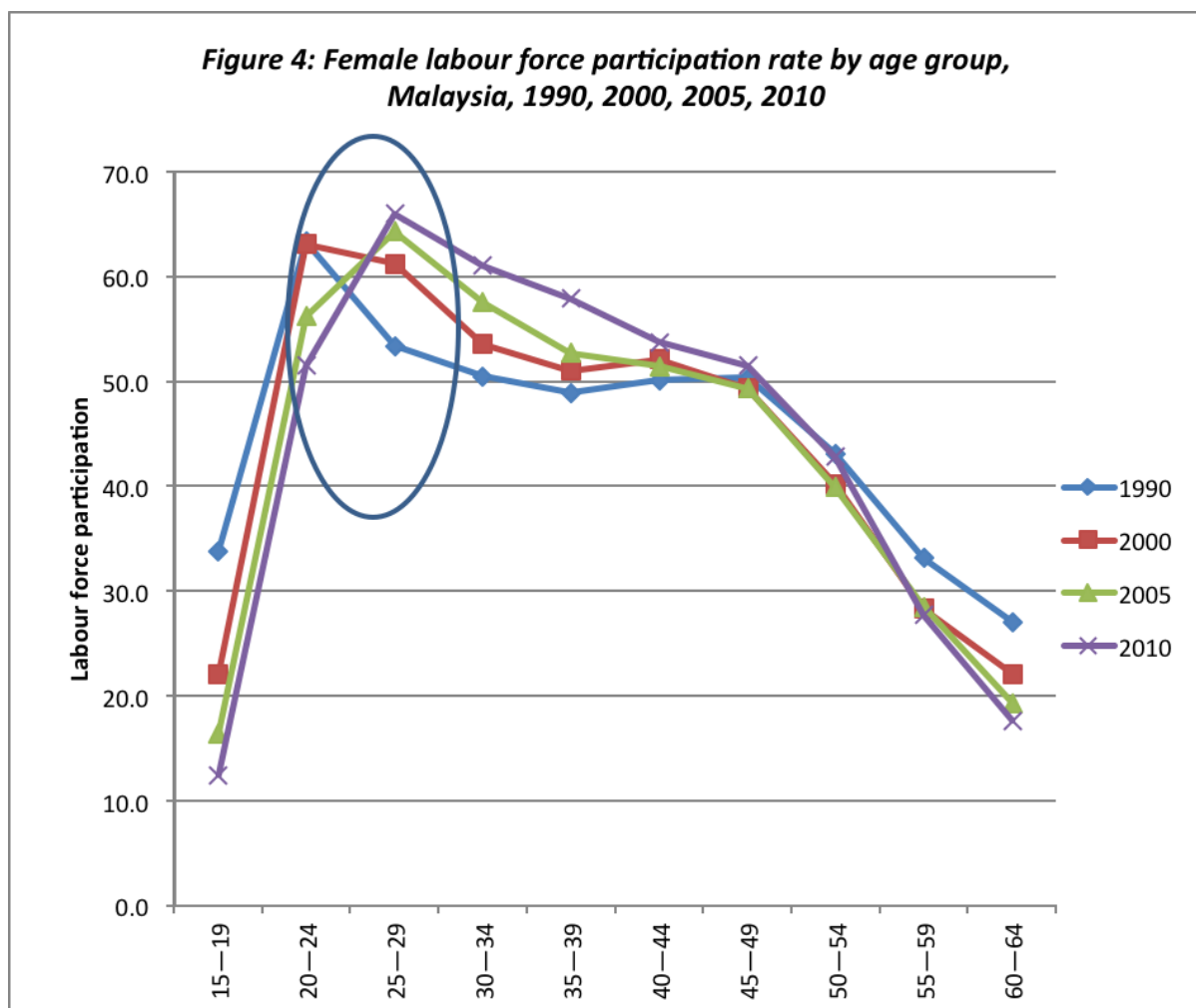
It is also important to compare Malaysia with other upper middle income countries which are enjoying an upward trend in female labour force participation rates. Figure 2 below show that these upper middle income countries have an upward trend in female labour force participation rates. Countries like Chile, Argentina and Venezuela had lower female labour force participation rates in the 1990s compared to Malaysia but these countries show an upward trend in female labour force participation rate compared to Malaysia. Brazil shows a healthy and consistent upward trend but started off at the same level with Malaysia in the 1990s and by 1995 had overtaken Malaysia by a 10 percentage point and has since been moving upwards. China has the highest female labour force participation rate among the upper middle income countries (see figure 2) in Asia. Women's participation in the labour force in Malaysia has remained more or less constant since the 1990s. The Malaysian female labour force participation rate has climbed to 52.4 percent in 2013 and having breached the 50 per cent mark that was not in sight for nearly four decades shows that the investment in female education is finally bearing results (Thambiah 2016). However, a higher percentage of women than men in Asia work in the informal economy (Carr and Chen 2001; Chen 2016), and in Malaysia there has been an upward trend in the involvement of women in the informal economy. As a result, the link between working in the informal economy and being poor is also stronger for women than for men. The increasing size of the informal economy in Malaysia, of which "casual work"

forms a subset, is an area of importance (Pearson 2012; Nor Hakimah Mohd Suhaimi et al. 2016; Xavier 2008). Gender differentials prevail in other important ways, not least being how women's share of the informal workforce is growing while that of men is declining. In 2012, women constituted 41 percent (427,300) of the total employed in the informal economy; in 2015, this proportion had increased to 49 percent (689,100). In 2015, women in the informal economy were overwhelmingly own account (77 percent) or unpaid family workers (13 percent) while most men were own account workers (64 percent) or employees (29 percent) (DOS 2016). The share of women employed as informal workers also increases with age, and peaks in the 45-54 year old cohort. This is unlike their male counterparts who, in 2015, were more actively engaged as informal workers when they were younger (25-34 years old) (DOS 2016). One explanation attributes this to women who drop out of the formal labor force as employees, and re-enter the workforce via the informal economy. In fact, the reason the relatively low female labor force participation rate in Malaysia is only partially understood is because a large number of women in the category "outside the labor force" are considered as missing from the labor force, i.e., not being productive (Franck 2010; Loh 2007). On the contrary, based on global facts about the informal economy, women tend to be productively engaged in informal work as own account workers, casual informal wage workers and industrial outworkers. Hence, although Malaysia's female labor force participation rate has been categorized as a single peak graph (World Bank 2012), the second peak is hidden in the informal sector (see also Franck 2012). The rate of informality or informal economy participation not only increases with age but is also higher among the poorly educated, and informality itself subjects women to very precarious working conditions (Thambiah & Tan forthcoming).

**Figure 2: Female Labour Force Participation, Selected Upper Middle Income Countries, 1990 - 2010**



Due to the difficulties of balancing work and family, many mothers with children drop out of the labour market and this hinders their career building. Figure 4 below shows the female age cohort labour force participation profile in Malaysia which shows a single peak pattern and the peak is in the age cohort 20-24 in 1990 and 2000 but the peak shifted to the age cohort 25-29 in the year 2005 (see figure 4) onwards while male age cohort labour force participation profile shows more of a plateau for the same age group. The male participation rate plateau shows that the prime working age of 25 to 44 for men was close to a 100% participation rate. The shift in the peak from 20-24 to 25-29 for females could be due to increased participation in tertiary education and delayed marriage. The exit from the workforce for women from the 25-29 to 30-34 and also 35-39 age groups is most likely linked to marriage, childbearing and child rearing. When women's labour force participation and employment over the life cycle or age groups is graphed, we see high rates in the young adult stages before childbearing and low rates in the child rearing years. Some women still leave the labour force on marriage and childbirth especially from the age group 25-29 to 30-34 but for the same age group there is an increase in the labour force participation and the employment of males. By comparing the figures for the age category 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 for both males and females we can see that there is an increase in male participation and a stabilizing of their employment rates but the reverse is happening for females whereby there is a substantive decline in the percentage (5-6%) of women employed in the age group 25-29 to 30-34. be due to increased participation in tertiary education and delayed marriage. The exit from the workforce for women from the 25-29 to 30-34 and also 35-39 age groups is most likely linked to marriage, childbearing and child rearing.



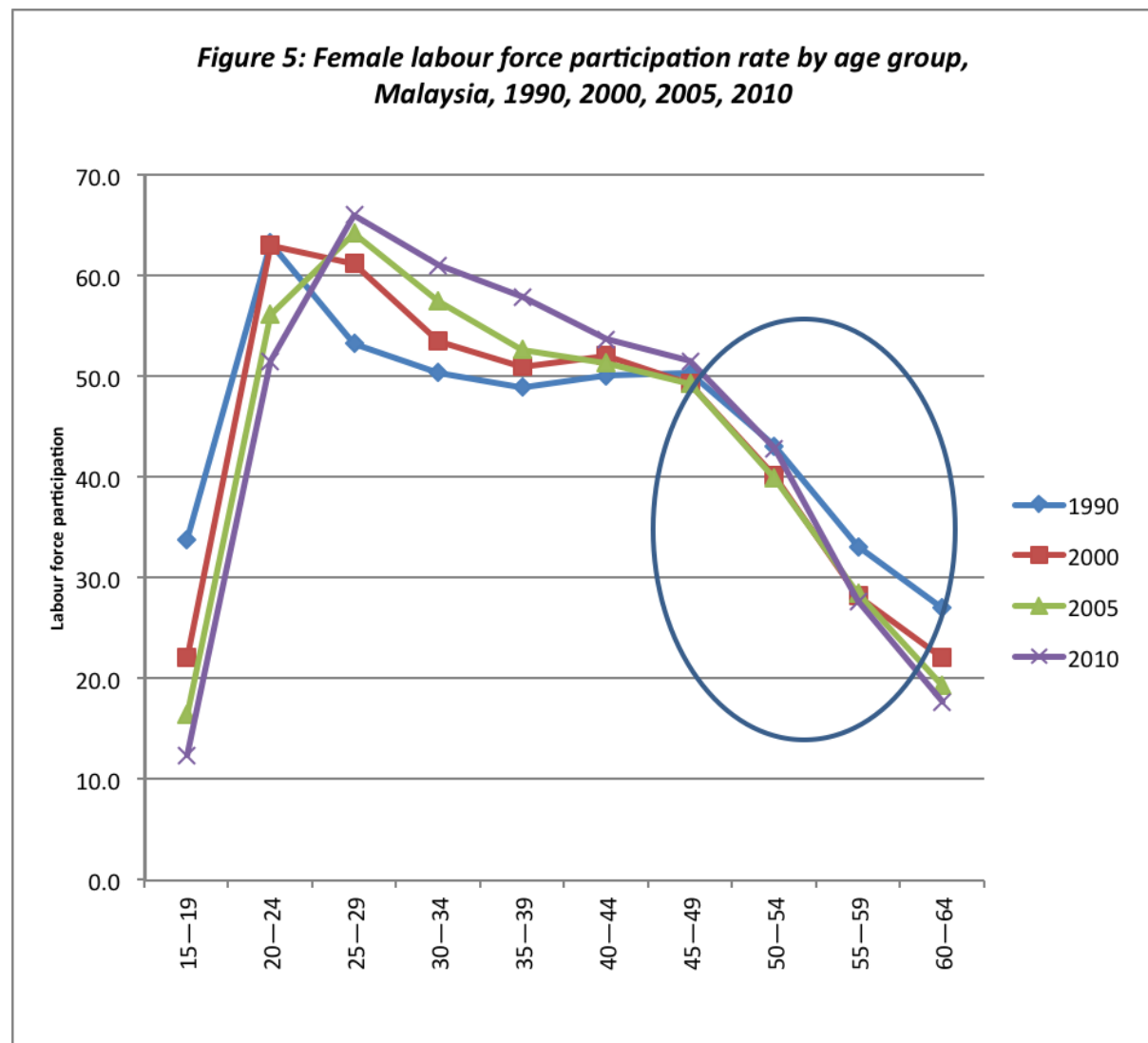
Policy initiatives in Asia – with an increasing female labour force participation rate in East and South East Asia, the lack of a work-family balance policy is directly related to women dropping out of the labour force because women are predominantly doing the child rearing and childcare. Malaysia, China, Hong Kong and most Southeast Asian countries need a general policy direction as implemented in some East Asian countries where childcare and elderly care are transformed from being solely the responsibility of the women in the family to a public-family partnership. Prolonged parental leaves, providing childcare and childcare subsidies and extending public care services should be the appropriate policy measures that can halt women from dropping out of the workforce and poorer women from re-entering the informal economy. Bringing a gender perspective into the family policy domain by addressing the social exclusion of mothers and women taking care of children from the labour market is paramount in ensuring justice to women by removing obstacles to income earning potential and facilitating the process of women being financially independent and therefore less at risk of being subjected to domestic violence and other forms of vulnerabilities.

### **An Aging Asia and Care of the Elderly**

Besides that an aging society is progressing in Asia but issues related to how to care for the elderly is only beginning to get the attention of Asian governments. Caring for the elderly has been predominantly a family responsibility in Asia and public investment for the elderly could not meet with the requirements for the elderly – inter-generational contract is seen as more



important than social contractors for individual well-being. There is a need to examine types of adult child – parent relationship and social class in Asian countries which is experiencing an aging population. This will reveal issues related to intergenerational solidarity. Like childcare care of the elderly is also mostly done by women leading to women dropping out of the labor force to care for the elderly in Asia. For example in Malaysia as shown in figure 5 below there is a steep decline in the percentage (8-9%) of women in the labour force in the age group 45-49 to 50-54 and declines even more steeply by 15.1% from the age group 50-54 to 55-59. The decline in labour force participation rate for women in the ages 45 and above has been increasing dramatically. The decline has widened between 1990 and 2010. This shows that the nature and causes for early retirement of women itself is changing. Traditionally retirement has meant the end of work after a career of full-time jobs. However, frequent entries and exists from the workforce for childcare, for elder care, or from layoffs among other reasons have left many women workers without traditional linear career paths. Moreover, there is a possibility that a large percentage of the female workforce is employed in part-time, temporary and contractual jobs in career paths with no clear trajectory. For these workers, then, the concept of retirement may have a very different meaning.



These women who are dropping out of the labour force for elder care will lose out in terms of pension and social security when they are older risking vulnerability and poverty in old age. There is a need to stop women dropping out of the labour force at later age with governments in Asia paying more attention to elder care especially in the Malaysian context.

### **Conclusion: Family Policy for Social Inclusion from a Gender Perspective**

A comparative analysis on fertility, family structure, female employment and family policy was conducted by Shin et.al (2013, 2014). Developing countries in Asia have experienced changes in family structure and relations of family togetherness with decreases in family fertility. Asia needs to work on family policies dealing with these changes in the family. It is a big challenge for most Asian countries because they are struggling even with formulating social welfare policy for the disadvantaged people. The trends that is changing the family such as the ageing population, declining fertility rate and decline in the commitment to marriage and in family solidarity such as higher divorce rates and declining co-residence with the elder generations are becoming prevalent.

In Asia both children and the elderly have relied on their families especially women to meet their care needs. This division of labour is not sustainable and is an obstacle to social inclusion of women which hinders the redistributive role of paid employment for women. The traditional family model with its traditional gender roles which is expecting women to bear the dual responsibilities of care giving and wage earning is no longer just. There is a need for a pro-egalitarian model for family policy to promote gender equality. Government need to take responsibility to help women to combine paid work and family responsibility and to get fathers to play a larger role in household chores, elder care and child care.

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