

IEM WE Essay Writing Competition on Gender Equality



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Gender equality entails the concept that all human beings, men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles and prejudices.

The differences in behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean women and men have to become the same but rather, that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities would not have to depend on their gender. This may include equal treatment, or treatment which may be different but is considered equal in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities.

Recently, IEM WE organised an Essay Writing Competition which attracted more than 30 submissions. Here, the 6 winners share their various opinions on this topic.

1. Ir. Heng Lee Sun: Even after decades, we are still struggling to achieve true gender equity in the workplace. Statistics from the International Labour Organisation shows that women continue to participate in labour markets on an unequal basis with men. In 2013, the male employment-to-population figure stood at 72.2%, while that for females was 47.1%. In 2015, only half of the world's working-age women were in the labour force, compared to 77% of working-age men.

To move forward, we have to accept that women and men are different and yes, we need to work together to achieve true equality. Men play equally important roles as a supportive family member, colleague or employer while encouraging women to aspire to leadership, to sit at the table, seek challenges and lean in to their careers. Empower women, for both men and women need to be encouraged and be respected for their efforts.

Equal opportunity is not equal unless everyone receives the encouragement that makes seizing opportunities possible. Empowering women and promoting gender equality are crucial to accelerating sustainable development. Ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it also has a multiplier effect across all other areas of development.

2. Zairul Amri Zakaia, a lecturer at Nila University, paints this scenario: A man and a woman, both of whom have very good jobs with similar wages, get married. Soon, their first child is born. After a long deliberation, the couple decide

that the father should stay at home to look after the baby while the mother continues to work to support the family.

How do you think society will react to this? More importantly, how do you feel about it? We can assume that some will agree with their decision and that those who feel men should be the ones to support the family, will disagree.

Even as we continue to discuss gender equality and about women getting the same treatment as men, most people will continue to support the traditional view that men should be the breadwinner?

Why is it so controversial when this role is reversed? This takes us back to my original point, which is our real perception of gender equality because, if we change our perception, start listening first and reserve our judgment, the real issues of gender equality will be easier to discuss.

Therefore, I feel that before we start discussing gender equality, or in fact anything, we must first throw away our ego and our judgement before entering the discussion or meeting room as equals; it doesn't matter whether we are men or women, which race or faith we are or which title we hold – everyone is entitled to his/her own opinion and we should respect each other for that.

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

3. Ir. Mah Siew Kien: More than 100 years have passed since International Women's Day was first observed in 1911. Yet, we still see news coverage on violence against women, equal citizenship rights debate, gender bias and stereotyping cases.

On one side, there are the men and women fighting for women's rights and equality. On the other side are people who refrain from making comments on this issue. This group of people acknowledges that not only does gender equality exist but also that life has always been unfair and that this is not limited to women. Based on data from the Malaysian Labour Force Survey Report (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015), the labour force participation rate for women in Malaysia has been consistently falling behind men by more than 25% for the

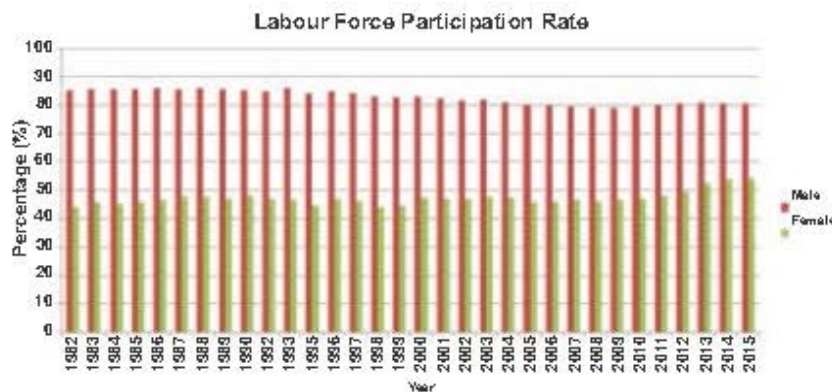


Figure 1: Department of Statistics, Malaysia

past 33 years. Low levels of female participation, coupled with an ageing population, can lead to low productivity and this will ultimately affect the country's GDP growth rate.

The life expectancy for males in Malaysia is 71.1 years and for females, it is 76.7 years. Since women tend to outlive men, the poverty rate for older women tends to be higher than that for men. Indirectly, achieving gender equality will lead to a stronger economy. Gender inequality is therefore, an economic concern.

WOMEN ENGINEERS IN THE EDUCATION ARENA

4. Dr Siow Chun Lim: Since the country attained Independence some 59 years ago, the education field has undergone significant dynamics in some aspects while status quo is preserved in other aspects. What makes me a proud Malaysian is that there hasn't been any major issue of gender discrimination against women here with regards to the right to education. Unlike many developing and under-developed countries, the access to free and compulsory primary education is guaranteed for all Malaysians, irrespective of gender. The number of girls enrolled in primary and secondary schools has risen steadily in the past few decades and it is only a matter of time before it equals the number of enrolment for boys.

In fact, the number of female students in public universities has overtaken that of male students since more than 15 years ago. It is safe to say the gap will steadily narrow. Based on my observations, the same scenario is also replicated in private universities. Visit the libraries, lecture theatres and classrooms and one will see more female students than male students.

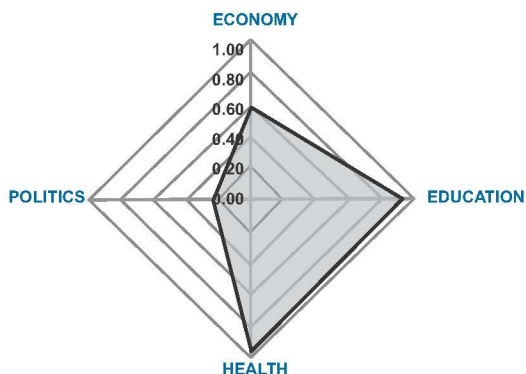
It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that the academic performance of women at all levels of education is also better than that of men. This is also one of the main reasons why more than half of university undergraduates here are actually women.

Although there are significantly fewer female students in technical and vocational courses, this is purely attributed to preference and perhaps gender stereotyping but not because of gender discrimination. One can expect to see more girls studying Chemical and Food Engineering than Civil and Mechanical Engineering. In my opinion, this should not trigger any panic as the freedom to choose what to study should be safeguarded.

Today, there are both male and female programme directors, deans and deputy deans. The number of female professors in engineering faculties is also growing steadily. The point I want to highlight is that it is choice rather than any form of pressure which determines whether a leader is a man or a woman.

GLOBAL GENDER GAP INDEX (GGGI)

5. Kamila Ab Hamid: The present study on gender gap has been analysed globally (145 countries are included in the analysis) and is shown in Figure 2. It can be deduced that overall, the education and health sectors have progressed to reach “zero” gender gap or that gender equality has been achieved. However, a “huge” gender gap can be significantly noticed in politics and economy.



Sample average (0.00 = inequality, 1.00 = equality)

Source: Global Gender Gap Index 2015

Figure 2: Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)

Based on the analysis mention earlier, the top 5 countries with highest GGGI are Iceland (0.881), Norway (0.850), Finland (0.850), Sweden (0.823) and Ireland (0.807). However, among the 145 countries, Malaysia ranks 111, with a GGGI value of 0.655 with the index for the corresponding sectors as per Table 1.

Table 1 summarised that gender inequality had been observed in areas of education, health, economy and politics. However, huge gender disparities were encountered in the political sector. Political empowerment refers mainly to the number of women with regards to seats in parliament, at ministerial level and number of female heads of state. The political obstacles that women face, as observed by Nadezhda Shvedova, are lack of party support, prevalence of masculine model, lack of sustained contact and cooperation with other public organisations as well as nature of the electoral system, etc. Hence, in most countries, there is less female involvement in many decision-making sectors due to the sceptical/ stereotype view of the capabilities of women to uphold such positions. However, the GGGI for Malaysia has been reported to have risen progressively compared to the past few decades.

Table 1: Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)

| Country | Global Gender Gap Index | Economy Participation and Opportunity | Educational Attainment | Health and Survival | Political Empowerment |
|----------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Malaysia | 0.655 | 0.634 | 0.976 | 0.969 | 0.051 |

6. Muk Pui Yan: IEM Student Section (UHTM): One of my male friends asked me: "Women have women's rights but what about men?"

It is a good question. As we can see, in real life, women are protected by the law. Men will also come out to defend women but they have to protect themselves when they are bullied. I suggest that women learn the art of self-defence so that they can defend themselves, the weak and perhaps even men.

Women have no reason to be weak or emotional. It has been argued that women are more emotionally aware than the men. Women cry to express sadness or stress. However, when men cry, they are seen as feeble. Sometimes, men also act as a punching bag for women. Why don't men have rights or laws to protect them against violence and abuse? Aren't we looking for gender equality? Why shouldn't men be allowed to express themselves emotionally? It seems like double standards.

CONCLUSION

For the future that we want, let us draw strength from each other and work together to achieve gender equality. We can move towards achieving prosperity without leaving anyone behind, and definitely not women. Let us "Lean In" for each other and reap the benefits of gender equality.

A higher GDP, a stronger economy and a better society... these are the main motivators to advocate for gender equality. ■

IEM Essay Writing Competition Results:



Champion
Ir. Heng Lee Sun



First Runner Up
Zairul Amri Zakaria



Second Runner Up
Ir. Mah Siew Kien

Consolation Prizes:



Kamila Ab. Hamid



Dr Siow Chun Lim



Muk Pui Yan

Author's Bio data

Ir. Dr Leong Wai Yie, Chairman of Women Engineers Section. She is involved in biomedical signal processing analysis and wireless communication.