WOMEN AS SKILLED LABOUR IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY OF MALAYSIA: POTENTIAL AND CONSTRAINTS

Masidah Abdul Majid & Wardah Fatimah Mohammad Yusoff
Department of Architecture,
National University of Malaysia
masidahayu@yahoo.com

Abdul Razak Sapian
Department of Architecture,
International Islamic University Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In the construction industry of Malaysia, the problem of shortage of local skilled labour has remained unsolved. Despite the various efforts done by the government and its key agencies like the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), the construction industry is still relying on the foreign labour to perform skilled work even though majority of them are unskilled. In other countries including the UK, US and India, more women are looking for opportunity to become skilled labour. Unlike Malaysia, jobs as construction skilled labour is not widely applied by women despite there is ample of work opportunities. Based on the Malaysian labour force statistics, there are around 170,000 women who are unemployed and may become a potential source of labour to address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour provided that they are properly trained. Findings from literature review from this on-going thesis show that there is a potential for women in Malaysia to be attracted to become skilled labour for the construction industry. Nevertheless, the specific constraints that militates the entry of women to construction must be first identified and addressed.

Keywords: Women, the construction industry of Malaysia and skilled labour

1. Introduction

In the economy of Malaysia, construction is important in terms of its proportion of GDP and GFCF, the number of people it employs as well as its strong linkages with other sectors (Fadhlin Abdullah, 2004; Khairuddin Abdul Rashid, 2002). Despite the significant economic contribution which the sector can offers, there has been a paucity of empirical research on how to address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour which the construction industry of Malaysia has longed suffered. This has resulted in the industry being high reliance on foreign workers especially from the low-income countries including Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indonesia although majority of them are unskilled (Abdul Rahim Abdul Hamid, Singh, Wan Zulkifli Wan Yusof, Aminah Md Yusof, & Norzamzila Mustafa, 2011). As various mega projects being carried out presently as part of the measures to achieve the status of developed country, the demand for new skilled workers has been estimated at 100,000 at least until the year 2020 (Utusan Malaysia, 2012).

The challenge for the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) and vocational education and training agencies in the construction industry of Malaysia is to find ways of helping to meet these skill requirements. One potential solution as suggested by various authors is to look to diversify the construction industry’s current recruitment base, which has historically relied upon the male to form the vast majority of its workforce (Ahuja & Kumari, 2012; Berik & Bilginsoy, 2006; Gurjao, 2006; Zakaria Mohd Yusof, 2005). Presently, there has been increasing number of research which attempt to promote gender equality and highlight the impact of women under-representation in the construction industries (Chan & Dainty, 2007; Andrew R. J. Dainty, Neale, & Bagilhole, 2000;
Yean & Poh, 2004). However, in relation to the present scenario in the construction industry of Malaysia, the objectives to diversify recruitment and attract women to become skilled labour seems to be important to solve the problem of shortage of local skilled labour rather than promoting equal opportunities. Indeed, in Malaysia, women receive equal opportunities to venture in any field of education and workforce (Yet-Mee, 2013) as compared to country like India in which gender discrimination is obvious due to scarcity of work opportunities (Ahuja & Kumari, 2012). According to Ahuja & Kumari (2012), in India, women seek the opportunities to become skilled labour in order to obtain more decent wages. Contrary in Malaysia, job as construction skilled labour is not widely applied by women despite there are numerous vacancies.

As diversification of recruitment could be one potential solution to address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour in the construction industry of Malaysia, there is a need to investigate the possibilities to attract women to become skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia. In the attempt to attract women as skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia, two important questions which need to be addressed are:

1. Is there a potential for women in Malaysia to become skilled labour?
2. Should there is a potential, what are the constraints that may prevent women from becoming skilled workforce for the construction industry of Malaysia?

This paper reviews literature pertaining to women in the economy of Malaysia. There are two main objectives which the present paper wishes to achieve. First, to identify whether women in Malaysia has the potential to be attracted to become skilled labour for the construction industry. Second, the paper intends to investigate the type of constraints which women may encounter in order to become skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia and address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour.

2. Method

This paper is purely a presentation of findings from literature review. The processes involve three important steps i.e. data bases searched, search terms and selection of papers for inclusion in the review. The electronic databases searched in this review included those identified associated to social sciences: Science Direct, EBSCO (consisting of Psychology and Behavioural Science) Emerald and IEEE. The specific terms which have been used in the search for relevant literatures include “women in construction”, “women as manual workers”, “trades women”, “skilled workers”, “women in economy” “women in Malaysia” and “women in employment”.

Papers that were selected are those based on empirical evidence related to the causal of under-representation of women in construction, strategy in attracting women and experience of women in the construction industry. In relation to women in the economy, the papers that were selected is focused to women at work and work in the SET sectors. Using these three steps, 60 papers met the inclusion criteria and were identified as relevant to the current review.

3. Potential of women as skilled labour

Women in Malaysia have gone through dramatic changes in their personal and professional lives both at work and at home. Across the states in the country more women are working as compared to the past ten years, i.e. 1995. In 2013, there are around 52.4% women in the labour force as compared to 44.7% in year 1995 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014).

There changes in the participation of women in employment include both quantity and category. Women have started to venture in science, engineering and technology (SET), and also services sectors that traditionally dominated by men (Azizan Baharuddin, 2003; Nuraihan Mat Daud, 2009). Improvement in academic achievement, availability of scholarship and encouragement by government since the introduction of the New Economic Policy more than 20 years ago gradually boost the entry of women in SET sectors (Nuraihan Mat Daud, 2009).
The increasing participation of women in non-traditional sectors is found to be closely linked with economic factor. Feminist writers suggested that in the past and present, women want to be more economic independence (Fatimah Daud, 1985; Jariah Masud & Laily Paim, 1999; Jariah Masud, Zumilah Zainalaludin, & Lumayag, 2009; Ludher, 2009; Nik Rosnah Wan Abdullah & Norma Mansor, 2009; Nur Hafizah Yusoff & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, 2012; Sazali Abdul Wahab, Al-Mamun, Mohammad Nurul Huda Mazumder, & Zhan, 2014). Additionally, the earnings received help them to supplement their husband's income to gain better quality of life. The fact that male-dominated jobs provide higher income (Abankwa, 1997; Clarke, Pedersen, & Wall, 1999) than the women's traditional jobs can be suggested as one of the reasons that prompt the entry of women. As such, the desire of women to work in non-traditional jobs is not only happening to women with higher education attainment who participated in the professional fields. For the past three years there has been wide publication in the local mass media on the increase involvement of women in the defence and services industries (either as policewomen, army or drivers) (Amizul Tunizar Ahmad Termizi, 2010; Camoens, 2013; Farah Fazanna Zulzaha, 2014). Apart from that, the significant transformation in terms of attitude and behaviour are causing challenging works to become the increasing choice of many women in Malaysia (Nuraihan Mat Daud, 2009). Based on the changes experienced by women, in relation to the present study, the high acceptance on non-traditional jobs posits a good sign that there is a potential in attracting them to become skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia and address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour.

In addition to examining the present situation of Malaysian women, information from department of statistics provides useful information to investigate the potential of women as skilled labour. From the large number of women entering the labour market, within five years, there is an average of approximately 160,000 people who are unemployed and looking for job opportunities. More interesting fact is in 2013, 94% of them are young women within the ages of 15 and 39 years old (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2014). With the problem of local skill shortages which has plagued the construction industry of Malaysia for many years, the availability of the pool of unemployed women must not be overlooked. Nevertheless, as present, any effort to increase women’s understanding on job as skilled labour in the construction industry is poorly developed.

However, it cannot be denied that women are often associated with jobs that do not require physical strength, not involving the machine, requiring precision, and in clean and tidy work environment (Ratnawati Yuni Suryandari, 2013). This perception may hinder any effort to attract women to become manual workers for the construction industry of Malaysia. Nevertheless, from historical perspective, women have long been involved in heavy work which suggests that there should not be an issue for them to engage in construction field. In Malaysia, before independence, many women worked alongside their husbands to help generate income. If paddy planting was the domain of Malay women, Chinese women were found in tin mining while Indian women in commercial crop cultivation such as rubber, pepper, gambier and pineapple (Nik Safiah Karim, 2009).

In relation to construction, across countries, there has been increasing literature describing the participation of women as trade workers. Women earliest involvement as skilled labour was reviewed and discussed by Hatipkasaulu & Roff (2011). The authors stated that throughout the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries, middle-class women living in France, Spain and Germany learned to perform construction skilled works under the supervision of their fathers or husbands. Some examples of the trades performed by women include masons, carpenters and door makers. Women significant involvement as skilled labour in the history of the construction industry was during the two world wars. In the UK, during these two wars, the recruitment of women in construction was vital to replace the vacancies left by men who were involved in the wars (Briscoe, 2005; Clarke, Michielsens, & Wall, 2006; Andrew W. Gale, 1994; Gurjao, 2006). Some examples of the tasks performed by women include plumbing, shipwriting and carpentry. However, when the wars end, majority of the women returned to their traditional role and the jobs in construction was reverted to the men (Gurjao, 2006).
Among the successful of the comparative studies on women as manual workers was that by European Institute for Construction Labour Research (CLR). The study aims to give insights of those women who have, who are and who will one day work in manual jobs in construction. In the studies, the CLR seeks cross-national validity in the dimensions of work orientations of women in the construction industries of Europe, Africa and Asia. The findings from the study may dismiss all negative perceptions about women’s incapability to perform tough and technical works. The studies indicate that women, were found capable and appreciate the opportunities to become skilled labour but have to confront various institutional, cultural and structural constraints either to enter or remain in the job. Since the study were made across different countries and covering different continents, the findings can be applied to all countries to suggest that women have the potential to become skilled labour regardless of country (Clarke et al., 2004).

In Malaysia, literature describing the involvement of women as skilled workers is limited. As present, the statistics gathered from the CIDB shows that there are women who worked as skilled workers even though the nature of work performed is not clearly stated (CIDB, 2012). While there are authors who argue that women are incapable to handle machines which highly associated with technical works, research conducted by Nur Hafizah Yusoff & Rahimah Abdul Aziz, (2012) is regarded to refute the claim and assert that if women were given the opportunities and exposure, they could become proficient after 6 years.

Nonetheless, one may argue the aspect of religion towards the participation of women as skilled labour. In the studies carried out on women at work in Malaysia (see for example Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006; Rohaiza Abd Rokis, 2011), religion is an aspect that were taken into consideration when choosing an occupation.

Since Muslim women forms part of the majority of potential construction skilled workforce, the appropriateness of the job in accordance to Islam need to be taken into consideration. The environment that is surrounded by male workers coupled with long and far working hours and place can lead to various perceptions from the public on the suitability of women as skilled labour in the construction industry of Malaysia. However, the present paper does not intend to discuss the views of all religions pertaining to women and work since that will divert the focus of the present paper. Hence, it will only provide a glimpse example to demonstrate how aspect of religion influences the potential of women to work in the construction industry as skilled labour. For this purpose, the religion of Islam is chosen based on two reasons. First, Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. Second, majority of the unemployed women who are also the potential skilled labour to solve the problem of skilled labour shortages are Muslim (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013). Thus far, the present paper discover one literature which suggests that Muslim women are not allowed to involve in construction work since these jobs involve mixing between men and women (Nuwawab al-Din & ‘Abd al-Rabb, 1992: 142). Nevertheless, to make a conclusion based on one view is inappropriate. Furthermore, the author’s opinion is not supported by any Quranic commandments or Hadith that sanction these prohibitions. However, based on other general studies pertaining to women and work, the following information has been gathered:

“A woman is allowed to work for paid employment as long as the work she does do not compromise her responsibilities as a wife and a mother” (Noraini Mohd Noor, 2006: 75).

“...I see no harm in women taking up employment out of their homes, provided, of course, their respect and honour are protected and their work does not cause their children and husband to suffer or be neglected...” (Mazhari, 2009)

In one of the e-sources, the author posted several guidelines that should be followed if a woman must work, and they are;
1. She must obtain consent from her guardian or husband (if married), who may offer a broader perspective on how her work may influence the family and its functioning.

2. A woman must ensure that her home and children are properly cared for. Her husband may be of assistance in this area, or outside help may be employed.

3. Care must be taken to choose employment that is appropriate and fits with her skills. Obviously, any work that deals with forbidden activities, services, or products would not be allowed.

4. Any job that prevents her from fulfilling any of her Islamic obligations, like hijaab or prayer for example, is not an option to be considered and;

5. While at the job, a woman must maintain her inwardly and outwardly modesty and chastity.


Based on the above findings, apart from the opinion by Nuwwab al-Din & ‘Abd al-Rabb, all other studies do not prohibit women from working in the construction industry as skilled labour. Hence, this implies that there is no obligation in Islam for women to become skilled labour for the construction industry. A woman is allowed to work in any profession, but with some limitations as listed above which is essential for the well-being of women themselves and their families.

The above discussions provide an initial indication that women have the potential to be attracted as skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia. Therefore, it is important for a critical literature review to be conducted to investigate what are the types of constraints experienced by women that may hinder any efforts to attract them to become skilled labour which could address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour. This will be discussed in the next section.

4. Constraints for women to become skilled labour

The involvement of women in the construction industry has been analysed along a number of dimensions and it is proposed that women globally experienced various types of constraints. Some constraints are revealed by numbers of surveys conducted among both operational and professional workers in the construction industries in order to maximise women’s representation in this sector.

Research into women professional construction employees is more extensive than that into operatives and generally majority concentrates on how to improve women’s career progression (Al Hallaq, Enshassi, & Ihsen, 2008; Bowen, Edwards, Lingard, & Cattell, 2011; A R J Dainty, Bagilhole, Ansari, Jackson, & Dainty R.J, 2004; Andrew R.J Dainty, Bagilhole, & Neale, 1999; Elvitagala, Amaratunga, & Haigh, n.d., 2006; Gale, 1994; Worrall & Hepr, 2012). In recent years, many international scholars have focused on the issue of skilled labour shortages and the need to attract women and therefore research into female construction operational workers is increasing (Ahuja & Kumari, 2012; Berik & Bilginsoy, 2006; English & Jeune, 2012; Génaidy, Salem, Dabke, & Daraiseh, 2008; Gurjao, 2006; Menches & Abraham, 2007; Ndinda, 2007; Whittock, 2002). Nevertheless, extensive reviews lead to a conclusion that the constraints experienced by women in the construction industries are somewhat similar regardless of their roles and positions. To provide a useful way of identifying the types of constraints, previous works were reviewed by looking at the stage where the constraints were experienced.

It has been argued that constraints experienced by women begin as early as the entry stage. Kehinde & Okoli (2004) pointed out that there is limited career guidance on the opportunities to work in the construction industry whereas Berik & Bilginsoy (2006) and Andrew R.J Dainty et al., (1999) stated that the traditional ways of recruiting workers through social networking are largely disadvantage the women. Apart from that, the 3D image of the construction industry also appeared to be an important demotivating factor which restricted women’s involvement in the industry.

Construction organization is proven to emerge as being both structurally and culturally male oriented. At the post-entry stage, the constraints experienced by women to remain in the industry are...
due to poor social welfare (English, 2008; Genaidy et al., 2008; Health and Safety of Women in Construction [HASWIC, 1997; Jha, 2002; Sarkar, 2002] and poor attitudes of the male counterparts (Al Hallaq et al., 2008; Arditi & Balci, 2009; Andrew R. J. Dainty et al., 2000) at various levels. The different needs of women such as separate sanitary facilities (English, 2008; Sarkar, 2002) or long vacation due to maternity or to care for sick family members are disfavoured by managers whole are overwhelmingly male. The demands greatly influenced the management’s perceptions on women’s career advancement. At the same time, as compared to men, women’s opportunities to attend training to improve their skill are more limited (Worral & Hepr, 2012). Therefore, in many occasions, the career development and progression in construction is often achieved by men. Even though there are women who manage to achieve higher rank, it took longer years for them to achieve that level as compared to the males (Andrew R.J Dainty et al., 1999). Apart from that, women are also felt uneasy on the fact that they were employed due to issue of shortages since they will be easily removed if the vacancy has been filled (Gale, 1994).

Past research also found that the presence of women is not fully accepted by the male workers (Genaidy et al., 2008; Whittcock, 2002). Women were discriminated in many ways, i.e. either being given marginal roles or being harassed in many forms by the male workers. Among the reasons for this discrimination may simply be due to the fact that construction is a male’s traditional job. Also, there is no doubt that women often associated with low wages and therefore it is important for men to prevent the entry of female in this sector so that the level of pay will not be reduced to the level of women’s salary (Barnabas, Anbarasu D., & S., 2009).

To remain in tough jobs like construction require full cooperation from the employers and also family members. Nevertheless, women who work in construction are expected to comply with male-oriented work practices which include long working hours in geographical disparate (Andrew R. J. Dainty et al., 2000; Watts, 2009). Although women obtain full support from the husband to work in the construction industry in order to increase the family income, across countries, the domestic jobs to care for home and children are still borne by women (Eliufoo, 2007; Watts, 2009). Hence, many women believed that construction job is incompatible to fulfil family life. The tension to remain working in the construction industry may be reduced if the sector has a good support system. Nevertheless, formal mentoring scheme is still lacking despite such system is strongly needed by women in order to continue working in the field of construction (Andrew R.J Dainty et al., 1999; Worral & Hepr, 2012).

Based on all the discussion above, it shows that women experienced many constraints to work in the construction industry. Although the construction industry in many countries has gone through various changes, there is still no sign that it will transform to make it easier for women to work in it. As such, more women decide to leave the construction industry and look forward to work in sectors which are less problematic.

5. The Way Forward

The parts of the on-going study presented in this paper are the potential and constraints of women to become skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia. The on-going thesis is looking at the possibilities of attracting women to become skilled labour in order to address the problem of skilled labour shortages in the construction industry.

Accordingly, although the discussions above give an indication that there is a positive sign for women in Malaysia to be attracted as skilled labour, nevertheless, the constraints experienced by female all over the world to work in construction posit that the initiatives may be challenging. As present, there is minimal attempt by local researchers to identify the constraints experienced by Malaysian women to work in the construction industry especially as skilled labour. However, the survey conducted by Nor Zailah Abdullah, Ruslan Affendy, & Mohd Hisham Ariffin (2013) among female graduates with at least a degree in construction subjects nonetheless manage to prove that most of the constraints experienced by women across countries are also felt by Malaysian women.
Nevertheless, the findings from this research must not be treated as exhaustive. The government’s initiative to produce more skilled and competitive workforce is targeted more on school leavers, and certificate and diploma holders. Hence a detail investigation on the type of constraints need to be done focusing on women who are still at schools or who have joined any skills training institutions (Jabatan Tenaga Manusia, 2014).

It must also be noted that the element of social factor will always influence women in making any decisions including career selection (Landis, 1997). An area of research yet to undergo much empirical testing in the construction industry is the effect of stereotypical belief on empowerment of women as skilled labour in the construction industry of Malaysia. Hence, the next stage of the on-going thesis will focus on identifying the specific constraints that may be encountered by women among female who are still at school and in the skills training institutions. The study is on-going.

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