

RECOGNITION WITHOUT REDISTRIBUTION: THE LIMITS OF INCLUSION-FOCUSED GENDER POLICY IN MALAYSIA

by Anis Farhana Amran



ABSTRACT

Women have long outpaced men in higher education and are widely present in professional roles. Yet inequalities in income and senior representation, among others, persist. Women are increasingly visible, but the terms and returns of their participation remain uneven. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1995) analytical distinction in the differing natures of gender inequality, this article argues that policy has prioritised inclusion at the point of entry while paying less attention to how rewards and opportunities are structured within institutions. Two paradoxes illustrate this misalignment: parity in professional representation coexists with unequal pay and sustained educational advantage has not translated into proportional economic outcomes. Framing all gender inequalities as a single broad issue risks creating an illusion of equality that masks durable gender disparities.

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by Anis Farhana Amran

Introduction: Misdiagnosing Gendered Economic Inequality

Malaysia's contemporary gender discourse is organised around participation as the primary marker of progress. Women have long outpaced men in higher education and have expanded their presence across professional occupations within the labour market. Yet disparities in

both pay and representation in decision-making roles remain entrenched. This coexistence of entry parity and outcome inequality raises a deeper question: is inclusion sufficient to ensure gender equality?

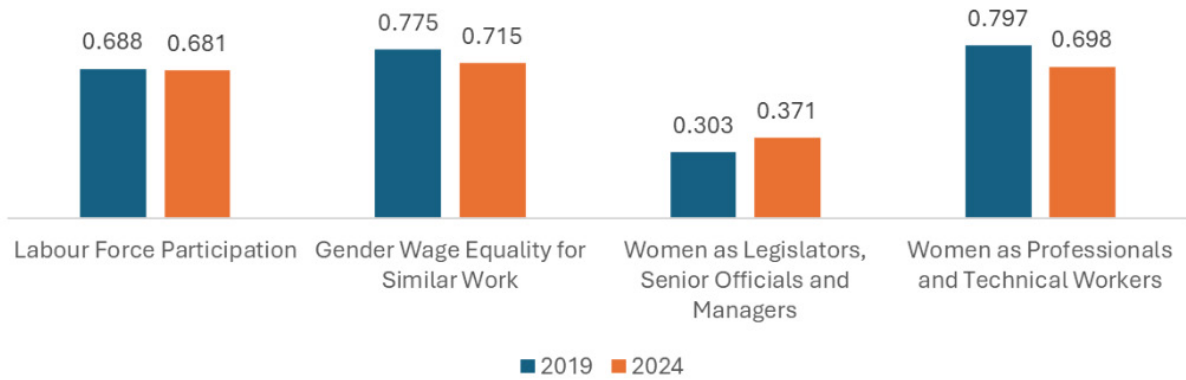
The Dominant Diagnosis: The Labour Force Participation Gap

In Malaysia's policy design, gender economic inequality is framed primarily as a problem of insufficient women's labour force participation, understood largely in terms of entry into and numerical presence within the labour market. As articulated in the 13th Malaysia Plan 2026-2030 and the National Women's Policy 2025-2030, women's labour force participation rate functions as the principal benchmark of economic progress, supported by targets to expand women's presence in entrepreneurship and in professional and technical roles, retain women in employment, and facilitate re-entry after career breaks (Government of Malaysia 2025; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2025). This emphasis is not

misplaced as women constituted only 37.4% of Malaysia's labour force in 2024 (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2025a). The low participation levels therefore rightly warranted the policy attention.

However, there are other equally critical aspects of gender inequality besides labour force entry. The Malaysian Gender Gap Index, aligned with the World Economic Forum's methodology, annually tracks wage equality, representation in senior managerial roles, and occupational positioning, alongside labour force participation (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2025b).

Figure 1: Economic Participation and Opportunity Indicators, Malaysian Gender Gap Index, 2019 and 2024



Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025b).
Notes: Scores range from 0 (maximum inequality) to 1 (full parity).

Figure 1 shows that between 2019 and 2024, gender wage equality declined, while women’s representation in decision-making roles, though modestly improved, remained far from parity. These patterns indicate disparities in reward and decision-making power that

persist alongside labour force participation gap. Therefore, treating labour force participation as the principal engine of equality compresses these structurally distinct inequalities into a single diagnostic frame.

The Real Condition: Bivalence of Recognition and Redistribution

To clarify this misalignment, Nancy Fraser’s distinction between recognition and redistribution offers a useful analytical lens (Fraser 1995; Fraser and Honneth 2003). **Fraser conceptualises gender inequality as bivalent, formed of two intertwining yet distinct dimensions:**

- Misrecognition: institutionalised patterns of cultural value that deny women equal standing as economic actors
- Maldistribution: structural inequalities in how income, opportunity and decision-making power are allocated within economic institutions

Viewed through this lens, **Malaysia’s gender economic policy implicitly treats inequality primarily as a problem of recognition at the point of labour market entry.** Instruments such as upskilling and reskilling programmes, targeted for career re-entry and meeting participation targets, enhance women’s recognised legitimacy as economic actors. These measures serve to elevate women’s status and expand their prospects for entry into the workforce. In Fraser’s terms, they operate predominantly within the recognitional domain.

By contrast, measures that directly confront maldistribution remain comparatively underdeveloped. Disparities in both pay and representation in senior managerial positions remain insufficiently addressed. They reflect the longstanding inequalities within organisational hierarchies and valuation structures. Expanding entry does not, on its own, redistribute income or decision-making power.

Fraser cautions against precisely this reduction: treating gender inequality as if it is reducible to a single dimension. Addressing misrecognition alone cannot eliminate problems of maldistribution. Where gender inequality is bivalent, policy design must differentiate between status-based and political-economic mechanisms, rather than presuming that gender inequality is unidimensional.

The following sections illustrate this bivalence through two empirical paradoxes. The first examines recognitional gains in professional employment: women have long been recognised as equally capable of participating in the professional professions, as indicated by their near-parity representation in high-skill occupations, yet wage disparities persist within that same segment. The second interrogates the meritocratic premise underpinning continued upskilling efforts: women have long outperformed men in higher education, indicating the equalised educational status, yet inequalities in pay and representation in senior managerial positions remain entrenched. **Together, these cases suggest that credential attainment and labour market entry do not automatically yield proportional redistribution of income or decision-making power within the labour market.**

Paradox 1: Equal Entry at the Top, Unequal Reward

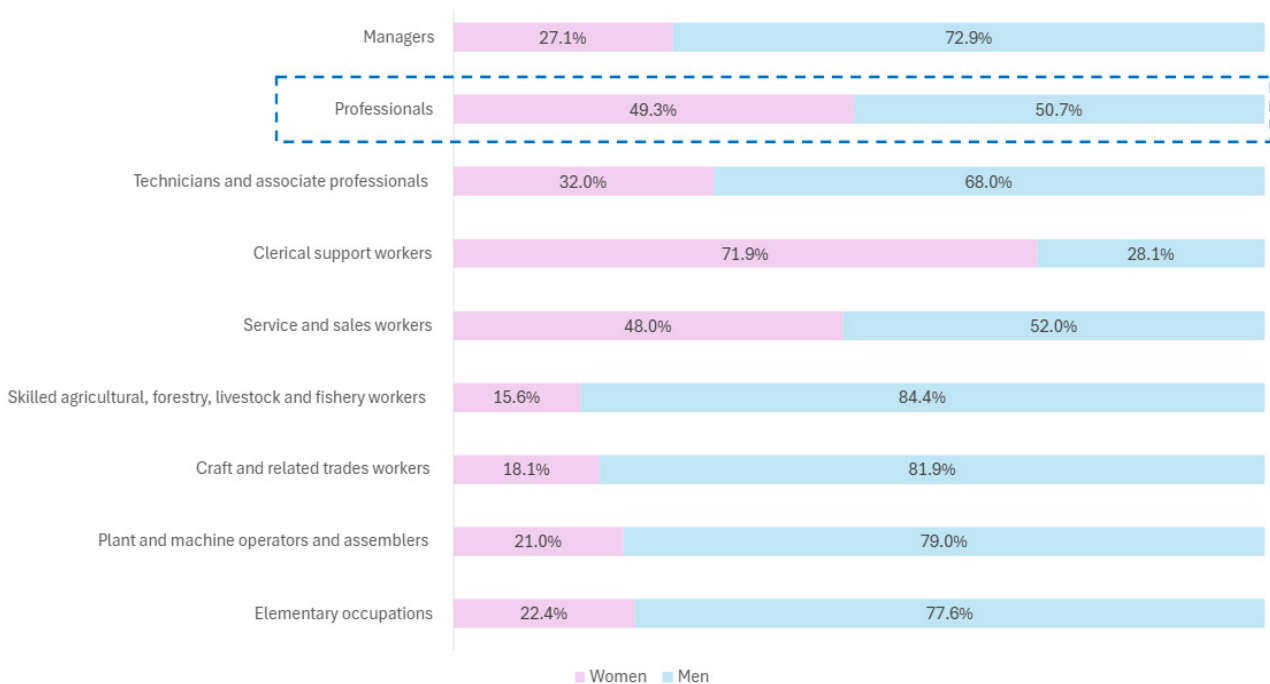
This paradox examines the case of women professionals, where representation has been near parity for more than three decades, yet earnings remain unequal.

Near Parity in Professional Representation

Professional occupations occupy the upper end of the occupational hierarchy. They are high-skilled, credential-intensive and associated with higher earnings. Under the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO), professionals fall under Major Group 2, the highest skill-level category, typically requiring tertiary qualifications such as a university degree or advanced diploma (Ministry of Human Resources 2020).

Despite women's persistently lower overall labour force participation, **representation within professional occupations has reached near parity**. In 2024, women accounted for 49.3% of persons employed in professional roles (Figure 2). Moreover, within each gender's employed population, **women are proportionately more concentrated in professional occupations**: 17.6% of employed women worked as professionals compared with 10.7% of employed men (Figure 3).

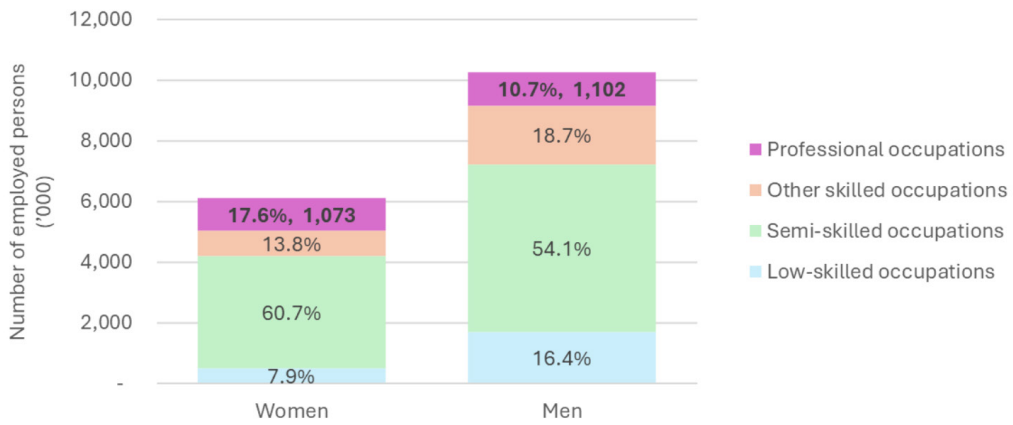
Figure 2: Gender Composition (%) by Occupational Group, Malaysia, 2024



Source: Figure adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025a).

Notes: Professional occupations refer to Major Group 2 under MASCO 2020. Major Group 1 (Managers) and Major Group 3 (Technicians and Associate Professionals) are also classified as high-skilled. Percentages indicate gender composition within each occupational group.

Figure 3: Employed Persons ('000) and Occupational Distribution (%), by Gender, Malaysia, 2024



Source: Figure adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025a).

Notes: Occupational groups are defined according to MASCO 2020. Percentages indicate the distribution of employed persons within each gender across occupational groups.

This pattern stands in contrast to the broader occupational structure. Across most occupational groups, including other high-skilled tiers, namely managerial positions and technical and associate professional roles, women remain significantly underrepresented (Figure 2). Professional occupations are therefore distinctive, representing a high-skill segment in which near parity has been achieved. In absolute terms, more women

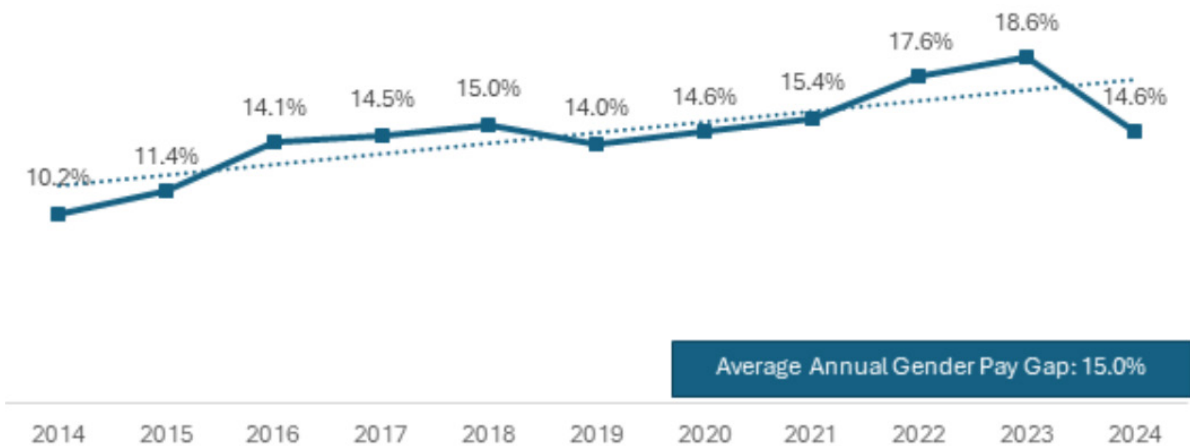
are employed as professionals than in managerial and technical roles combined (Figure 3). Near parity in this professional group suggests that **access to at least one upper-tier occupational category is not systematically restricted at the aggregate level**. While this does not rule out field-specific biases, it indicates that the persistence of inequality among professionals, if any, cannot plausibly be explained by barriers to entry alone.

Persistent Pay Inequality Within Professional Occupations

Yet the near parity in representation has not translated into pay parity. A ten-year comparison shows that between 2014 and 2024, the gender pay gap among professionals averaged 15.0%, fluctuating between 10.2%

and 14.6% with no sustained trend towards convergence (Figure 4). **In 2024, women professionals earned on average 85.4 cents for every ringgit earned by men within the same occupational tier.**

Figure 4: Gender Pay Gap (%) among Employed Professionals, Malaysia, 2014-2024



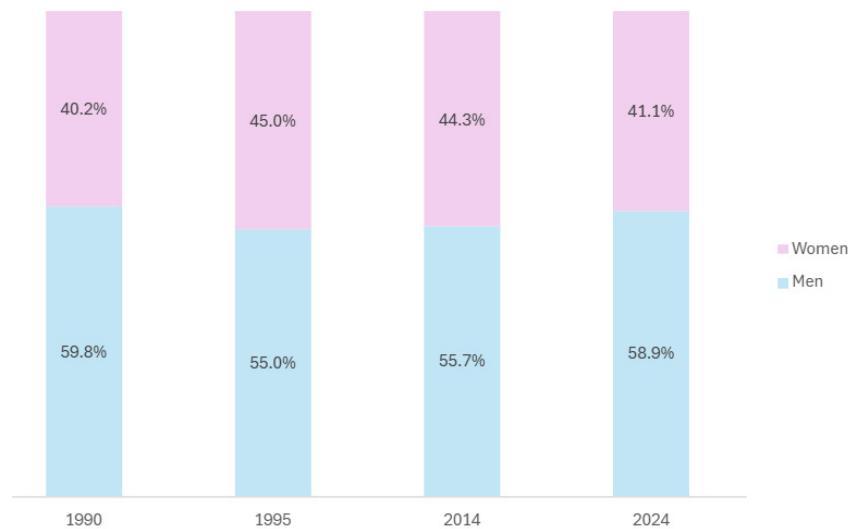
Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025c)

Notes: The gender pay gap is calculated as the percentage difference between men's and women's median monthly earnings, defined as $(\text{men} - \text{women}) / \text{men} \times 100$. Estimates are unadjusted and do not account for differences in working hours, occupation sub-specialisation, seniority, or other job characteristics. Median earnings are used to reduce the influence of outliers. Where reported, the average annual gender pay gap refers to the arithmetic mean of the yearly unadjusted gaps over the period. It serves as a descriptive summary rather than a pooled or cumulative measure.

Importantly, women's inclusion in professional work is not a recent development. As Figure 5 shows, women have long comprised over 40% of professional and technical workers since the 1990s. The combined category is used here for historical comparability, as earlier classifications

grouped these occupations together. **After more than three decades of sustained representation, persistent and widening pay gaps cannot plausibly be attributed to delayed earnings convergence between women and men.**

Figure 5: Gender Composition (%) of Professional and Technical Workers, Malaysia, 1990, 1995, 2014 and 2024



Source: Adapted from Government of Malaysia (2001), and Department of Statistics Malaysia (2015, 2025a)

Notes: Professional and technical workers are presented as a combined category to ensure comparability over time. In earlier data (1990 and 1995), these occupations were classified together. For 2014 and 2024, the category combines Professional occupations (Major Group 2) and Technicians and Associate Professionals (Major Group 3) under the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) 2020.

The widening wage gap is more plausibly linked to remuneration structures embedded within the professional labour market. One possible mechanism concerns workplace norms that reward inflexible availability. As Goldin (2014) argues, earnings rise disproportionately for those who can work long and inflexible hours in some professions. As women continue to shoulder a larger share of caregiving responsibilities, they are less likely to benefit from these reward structures, even when they hold the same professional roles. Another plausible explanation lies in uneven valuation across professional fields. As discussed in a previous

PNB Research Institute analysis, average entry-level pay in female-dominated professional fields is lower than in male-dominated ones (Amran 2025). This may reflect the devaluation of feminised work, market dynamics, or a combination of both, and warrants further investigation. Nonetheless, these mechanisms are illustrative rather than exhaustive. While the comparison is restricted to professionals and therefore controls for broad skill-level differences, the estimates remain unadjusted and do not account for hours worked, sub-specialisation or seniority (Blau and Kahn 2017).

What Paradox I Demonstrates

The paradox is therefore clear: recognition at the point of entry to the professional roles has expanded, but redistribution within has not. Women have secured sustained access to a high-skill occupational tier, yet the allocation of income and economic reward within that tier remains unequal.

This reveals the limits of an inclusion-focused model of equality. Even where women approach parity in representation, maldistribution persists. **If decades of professional inclusion have not eliminated pay disparities, then focusing primarily on entry and retention cannot by itself resolve gendered economic inequality.**

The persistence of inequality within a highly credentialed segment entered by competitively qualified women shifts the analytical focus away from access and towards valuation, remuneration and distribution of authority. It is this tension that gives rise to the second paradox.

Paradox II: The Incomplete Promise of Educational Merit

Education operates as an effective mechanism of recognition at the point of labour market entry, institutionalising women’s status as qualified economic actors, driving higher labour market participation. Yet this recognitional gain remains largely at the point of labour force entry, as it does not extend to redistribution

of material allocation and power within the labour force participation itself. This paradox explores how higher educational qualifications increase women’s labour force participation, yet they are still paid lower, and their representation in senior roles remains limited.

The Promise of Educational Merit

Malaysia’s dominant policy response to gendered labour market disparities continues to emphasise the strengthening of women’s human capital through education, retraining, upskilling and lifelong learning (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2025). **The underlying logic is meritocratic: equip women with skills and credentials, and fairer economic outcomes will follow.**

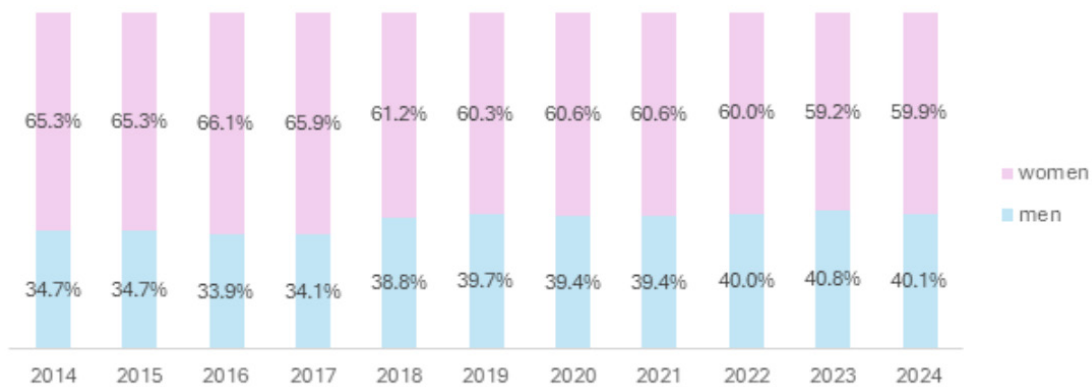
This reasoning draws implicitly on human capital theory, most prominently associated with Gary Becker (1964), which posits that investment in education enhances productivity and should be rewarded with higher earnings. If labour markets operate neutrally, returns to qualification ought to be allocated on the basis of merit. Under this logic, educational attainment becomes the primary lever for socioeconomic mobility.

Educational Recognition Long Achieved

Empirically, Malaysian women, on average, have long satisfied this meritocratic condition. Since the first publication of the Global Gender Gap Index in 2006, Malaysia has consistently recorded near gender parity in

educational attainment (World Economic Forum 2025). Women have also surpassed men in tertiary education, consistently accounting for the majority of bachelor’s degree graduates over the past decade (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Gender Composition (%) of Bachelor’s Degree Graduates, Malaysia, 2014-2024



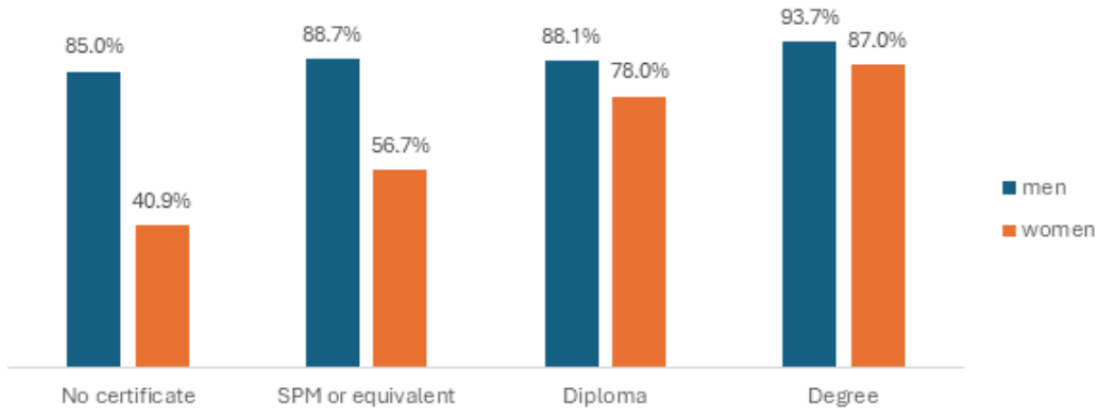
Source: Adapted from Ministry of Higher Education (2015-2025)

By attaining higher education in large numbers, women meet the very criteria that merit-based policies treat as the pathway to equal opportunity. Educational qualifications formally recognise women as equally capable and qualified participants in the economy, especially in occupations where entry is governed by credentials, such as professional and technical roles.

This recognitional gain is reflected in the labour force participation. As shown in Figure 7, the gender gap in participation narrows substantially at higher levels

of education. Among individuals with no formal qualifications, only 40.9% of women participate in the labour force compared with 85.0% of men. Among degree holders, participation rises to 87.0% for women and 93.7% for men. **While a participation gap remains, its magnitude is markedly smaller among the highly educated, indicating that educational attainment significantly strengthens women’s attachment to the labour market.**

Figure 7: Labour Force Participation Rate (%) by Educational Qualification Level, by Gender, Malaysia, 2024



Source: Figure adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025a)

Education thus functions as an effective mechanism of recognition at the point of labour market entry. Women with higher education are more likely to work. In the

sense of facilitating labour market entry, educational merit works here.

Yet Educational Parity Has Not Produced Equal Returns within the Labour Market

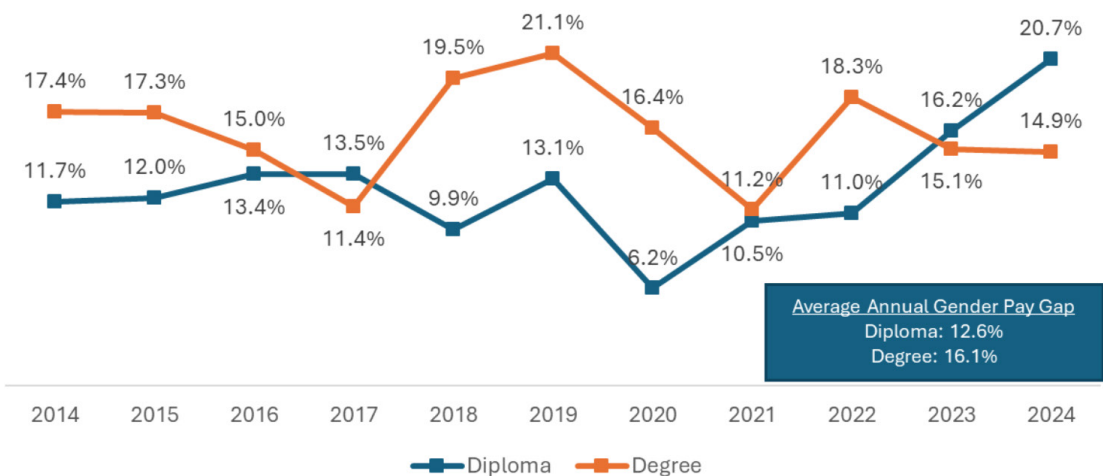
If educational merit functions as a neutral engine of equality, parity in qualifications should extend beyond entry into parity in labour market outcomes. It does not.

Persistent Pay Gap

Women continue to earn less than men at equivalent qualification levels. Over the past decade, the gender pay gap among tertiary-educated workers has shown no sustained convergence (Figure 8). In 2024, **women degree holders earned 85.9 cents for every ringgit**

earned by men degree holders, while women diploma holders earned 79.3 cents for every ringgit earned by men at the same level. The persistence of these gaps indicates that higher education does not exert a clear gender-equalising effect on pay.

Figure 8: Gender Pay Gap (%) by Educational Qualification Level, Degree and Diploma, Malaysia, 2014-2024



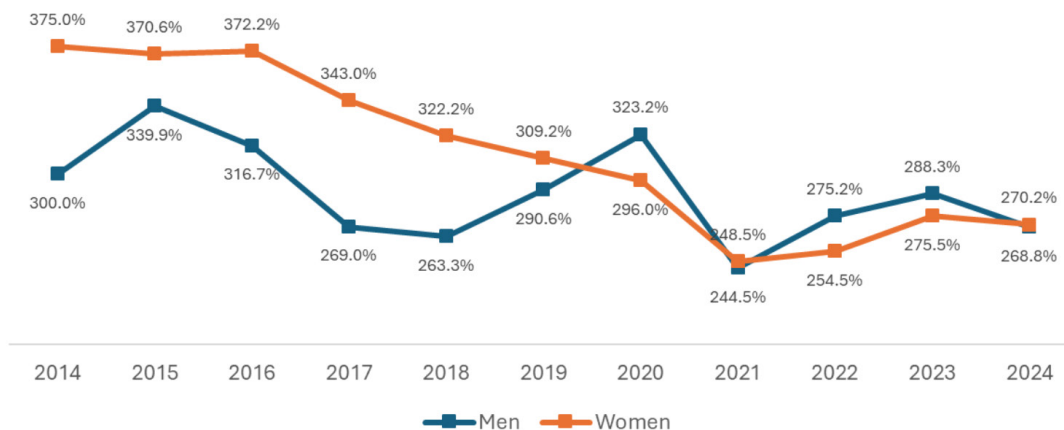
Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025c)

Notes: The gender pay gap is calculated as the percentage difference between men's and women's median monthly earnings, defined as $(\text{men} - \text{women}) / \text{men} \times 100$. Estimates are unadjusted and do not account for differences in working hours, occupation sub-specialisation, seniority, or other job characteristics. Median earnings are used to reduce the influence of outliers. Where reported, the average annual gender pay gap refers to the arithmetic mean of the yearly unadjusted gaps over the period. It serves as a descriptive summary rather than a pooled or cumulative measure.

Examining the academic premium within each gender group reinforces this point. The degree premium, defined as the percentage difference between the median earnings of degree holders and those with no formal education within the same gender, is broadly similar for

women and men (Figure 9). In 2014, the premium stood at approximately 270% for both women and men. In other words, **attaining a degree raises earnings to roughly 2.7 times higher than individuals of the same gender with no formal qualifications.**

Figure 9: Degree Premium (%) within Gender, Malaysia, 2014-2024



Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025c)

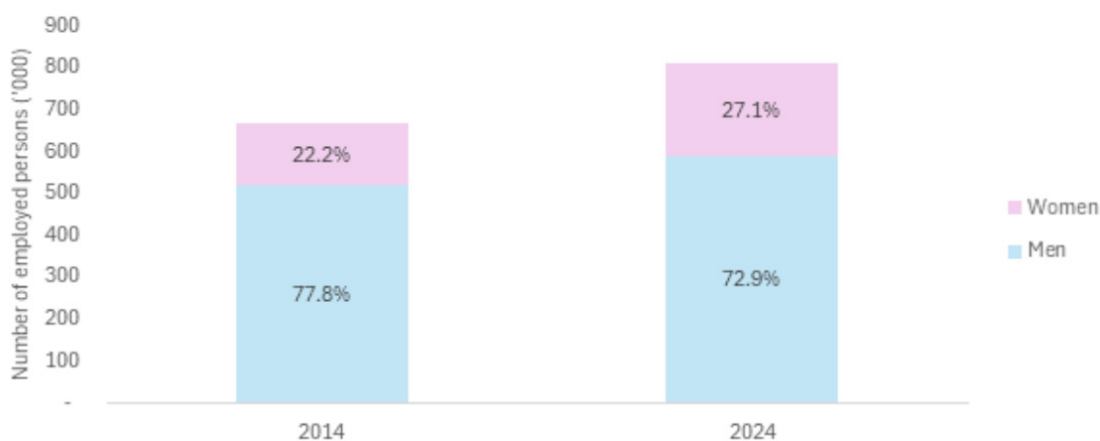
Persistent Authority Gap

The limits of educational merit are also visible in the allocation of decision-making roles within economic organisations. Women, despite their longstanding dominating presence in higher education and their equalising representation in professional roles, are still poorly represented in managerial roles that sit at the apex of occupational hierarchies, where decision-making power and economic returns are concentrated (Ministry of Human Resources 2020). **These figures demonstrate that education substantially improves earnings prospects for both women and men. However, returns operate proportionally rather than equalising across gender.** Similar percentage premiums across both women and men mean that education lifts earnings within each gender group but does not close the wage gap between them. **Women remain lower paid at every qualification level.**

These estimates are descriptive and unadjusted. They do not account for differences in occupation, hours worked, seniority or sectoral composition (Blau and Kahn 2017). Nonetheless, this illustrates that women generally earn less within this broad educational group.

In 2024, women accounted for only 27.1% of managers, up 4.9% points since 2014, but still far from parity (Figure 10). Within women's own employment base, only 3.6% were managers, compared with 5.8% of employed men (Figure 11).

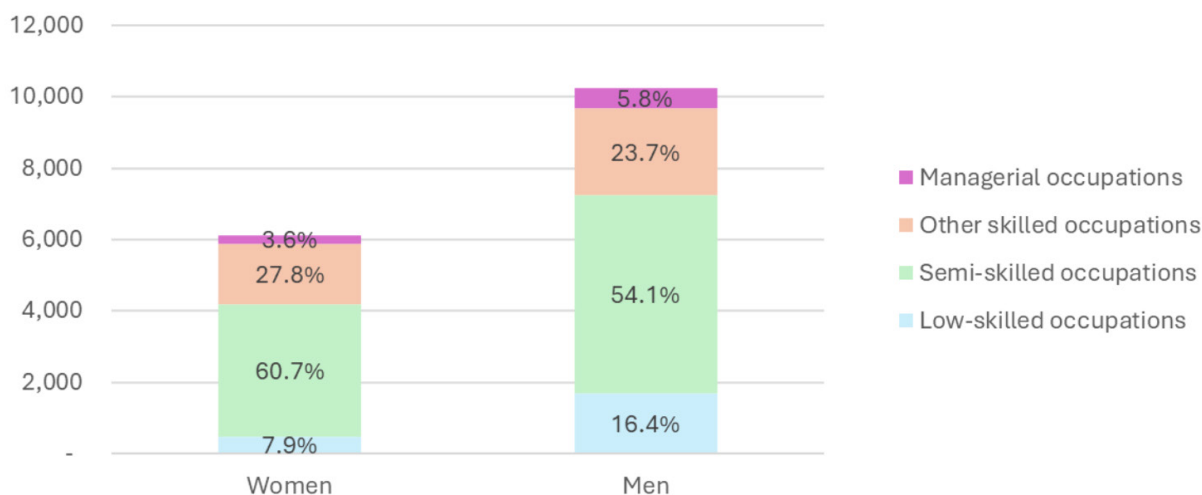
Figure 10: Number of Employed Persons ('000) and Gender Composition (%) in Managerial Occupations, Malaysia, 2014 and 2024



Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2015, 2025a)

Notes: Managerial occupations refer to Major Group 1 under the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) 2020. This group is classified as high-skilled employment, alongside Professionals (Major Group 2) and Technicians and Associate Professionals (Major Group 3). Percentages indicate the gender composition within professional occupations for each year.

Figure 11: Number of Employed Persons ('000) and Occupational Composition (%), for Women and Men, Malaysia, 2024



Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2025a)

Notes: Occupational groups are defined based on the Malaysia Standard Classification of Occupations (MASCO) 2020. Managerial occupations refer to Major Group 1. Other skilled occupations comprise Professionals (Major Group 2) and Technicians and Associate Professionals (Major Group 3). Percentages indicate the distribution of employed persons within each gender across occupational skill groups.

This contrasts sharply with professional occupations, as discussed in Paradox I, where women have achieved near parity (Figure 2) and are proportionately more concentrated than men (Figure 3). Women’s employment profile tilts towards professional roles, but not towards managerial authority.

The distinction between professional and managerial roles lies in how access is determined. **Entry into professional occupations is largely governed by formal credentials.** Educational qualifications serve as

standardised markers of competence, providing a clear, institutionalised pathway into these roles. In this sense, higher education enables women to be recognised as equally qualified participants within credential-based occupations. Advancement into managerial authority operates differently. **Managerial roles are not allocated solely based on formal qualification thresholds.** Promotion depends more heavily on discretionary processes, informal evaluations of leadership potential, and organisational judgements about authority and legitimacy.

This gendered allocation of managerial roles is a widely studied topic, especially from the perspective of cultural order. Schein's "think manager, think male" findings show that leadership traits are consistently associated with characteristics culturally coded as masculine, affirmed by women and men (Schein 1973, 1975, 2001). Thus, women may be equally qualified yet less readily recognised as legitimate leaders. Subsequent research also found a negative association with feminine traits when examining the modest rise of women organisational leaders. Ryan and Haslam (2005) identify the "glass cliff" phenomenon, showing that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during periods of organisational crisis. This has been described as a "think crisis, think female" pattern, in which feminine

traits are associated mostly with managing precarious or failing contexts (Ryan et al. 2011). Such an association reflects a conditional recognition of women as legitimate organisational authority figures. Women may be deemed suitable leaders, but mostly in times of crisis, while masculine-coded traits are more closely aligned with stable or growth-oriented authority.

This sits at the bivalence of maldistribution and misrecognition. Women are misrecognised for their feminine qualities that are deemed lesser than "ideal" leadership qualities, and the allocation of decision-making power within economic institutions remains unevenly distributed between women and men.

What Paradox II Reveals

The positive impact of educational merit seems to be limited to facilitating women's entry into the labour market, not so much in ensuring fair progression within it. In Fraser's terms, educational merit advances recognition at the threshold of the labour market. It institutionalises women's eligibility to participate. In this sense, education functions primarily as a screening mechanism. As Collins (1979) argues that educational qualifications often serve as instruments of status recognition rather than as guarantees of a fair allocation of economic rewards.

The question of maldistribution in labour market outcomes is a vast area of research in its own right. In explaining the "stalled" gender progress in the US, where women have surpassed men in higher education since the 1980s, yet still face a pay gap to date, England et al. (2020) discussed the gendered field concentration in higher education which led to occupational segregation and lower pay for women caused by feminised valuation of jobs, i.e., jobs predominantly held by women are structurally paid lower.

Similarly, in Malaysia, recent women graduates are still largely clustered into select fields that tend to mirror the occupational segregation in the workforce (Amran 2025). Alongside this, the prevalent discussion is the unequal care responsibilities that continue to be shouldered by women, despite being increasingly incorporated into the workforce, limiting their fairer participation, hence their prospects.

Thus, Paradox II should be treated as a diagnostic analysis based on available labour market outcome indicators, namely pay and distribution of authority within economic organisations, alongside general women's participation, to highlight the deeper maldistribution that lies beneath. It signals the implausibility of relying solely on initiatives that focus on enhancing women's education, training, and skills, all of which lead to credentials that are intended to facilitate economic gender progress. The inequalities lie deeper and beyond increasing women's status as credible economic actors.



Image generated by Lovart AI

The Illusion of Equality and the Fatigue of Aggregation

The two paradoxes do not simply reveal limits of the current inclusion-focused gender narratives. They also expose a **risk in how gender progress is interpreted and communicated**. When recognitional gains become highly visible, they can misguidedly shape perceptions of what remains unequal.

The Illusion of Equality

Visible gains in participation, education and professional representation can generate what this paper terms an *illusion of equality*. By this, the paper refers to the tendency for recognitional advances to be interpreted as evidence that gender equality has largely been achieved. As women become more present in the labour market and highly credentialed within it, visible inclusion can create the appearance of substantive equality.

Fraser's analysis of the redistribution and recognition debate helps clarify this dynamic. She argues that contemporary struggles for equality increasingly adopt a recognitional grammar, in which claims are framed in terms of status inclusion and cultural validation rather than political-economic restructuring (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Recognition becomes the dominant metric of progress. The problem is not recognition itself, but its elevation as the primary frame through which inequality is interpreted.

The Fatigue of Aggregation

If the illusion of equality misreads the scope of progress, what this paper terms the *fatigue of aggregation* concerns how gender inequality is communicated. By this, the paper refers to the public weariness that may arise when distinct gender inequalities are lumped together into one broad, undifferentiated problem. Participation gaps, wage disparities, occupational segregation and leadership underrepresentation are bundled together as one continuing problem. Such aggregation can generate reform fatigue. When inequality is presented as an ever-expanding and persistent agenda, public audiences may perceive it as unending, even where recognitional progress is visible.

Recent Ipsos findings illustrate this tension. 54% of Malaysians agree that "when it comes to giving women equal rights with men, things have gone far enough", comparable to the global average reported in the same survey across participating countries (Ipsos 2024). The phrasing "gone far enough" suggests a perception of saturation that the issue has already received substantial attention and advancement.

The two paradoxes examined earlier illustrate how this illusion operates in practice. In Paradox I, near parity in professional representation coexists with persistent gender pay gaps within the same high-skill occupational tier. Once women are visibly included, unequal reward structures become less immediately legible. In Paradox II, women's dominance in higher education satisfies the meritocratic condition, yet does not translate into equal pay or managerial authority. Educational attainment signals progress, but the economic and institutional returns remain uneven.

When participation and credential attainment are treated as principal indicators of equality, deeper redistributive inequalities recede from view. **Women appear to have "arrived" as educated and employed economic actors, while the terms under which they participate remain unequal.**

This perception may arise when visible gains in recognition, such as women's educational dominance and labour market participation, are interpreted as sufficient evidence of equality. If gender inequality is communicated as a single broad problem, without clarifying its distinct structural dimensions, further redistributive claims concerning pay structures, occupational valuation and authority allocation can appear as shifting or expanding demands rather than analytically separate issues.

The second Ipsos finding adds nuance. 51% of Malaysians report hesitancy to speak out in support of women's rights due to fear of negative repercussions, substantially higher than the 31% global average in the same study. This alarmingly suggests that gender discourse has become socially sensitive or polarised, potentially reinforcing reluctance to engage with increasingly complex claims.

The aggregated narrative, therefore, risks narrowing the perceived scope of inequality. Without analytical differentiation between participation, valuation and authority, policy debates may struggle to sustain support for redistributive reforms, even where structural disparities persist.

Remedying Gender Inequality: From Diagnosis to Recalibration

A Fraserian Map of Gender Remedy

Having distinguished the types of gender inequalities persisting in Malaysia's workforce through the analytical distinction between the nature of maldistribution and misrecognition, the question now turns to remedy.

Fraser (1995) has proposed distinct approaches in addressing inequalities:

- Affirmative, which corrects unequal outcomes without altering the structures that generate them; or

- Transformative, which seeks to restructure the institutional arrangements that produce inequality in the first place.

In simple terms, affirmative remedies adjust outcomes. Transformative remedies alter structures. Applied to the gender issues, the matrix can be summarised as follows:

Table 1: Conceptual Matrix of Gender Remedies Based on Fraser's Recognition-Redistribution Framework

	Affirmative Remedy	Transformative Remedy
Recognition (status order)	Revalue women within existing gender norms and institutional frameworks	Restructures the cultural and symbolic order that defines gender roles and authority
Redistribution (political-economic order)	Reallocates income, resources or opportunities to reduce gender gaps within existing economic structures	Reorganises the institutional arrangements of production, social reproduction, and reward that generate gendered inequality

Source: Author's adaptation based on Fraser (1995)

Malaysia's Predominant Orientation: Recognition-Affirmative

Malaysia's current gender policy landscape sits predominantly in the recognition-affirmative quadrant. The 13th Malaysia Plan and the National Women's Policy 2025-2030 prioritise increasing women's labour force participation, strengthening re-entry pathways, expanding women's representation in professional and technical fields, and encouraging engagement in STEM, TVET and entrepreneurship (Government of Malaysia 2025; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development 2025). The central mechanism is educational and skills enhancement.

Although framed in economic terms, the underlying strategy focuses on strengthening women's readiness to compete within existing labour market structures. The burden of adjustment rests primarily on women through upskilling, credential acquisition and employability.

Such measures expand women's recognised standing as economic participants. They do not substantially alter wage-setting rules, promotion systems or authority hierarchies. The system remains intact; women are better prepared to navigate it.

Emerging Redistribution-Affirmative Space

There is a growing scope for more explicitly redistributive approaches within Malaysia's gender policy landscape. Malaysia's participation in the World Economic Forum Gender Parity Accelerators Network, operationalised through the *Wanita MyWIRA* initiative, creates institutional space for such measures (TalentCorp 2025). The Accelerator is a public-private platform through which governments and employers commit to measurable national action plans to close gender gaps. Malaysia became the first ASEAN country to join in 2025.

In its first year, the co-investment model brings together approximately 1,000 companies to adopt flexible working arrangements and structured career comeback programmes. These initiatives move beyond a purely recognition-affirmative model centred on upskilling women. They intervene in the organisation of work itself.

Flexible working arrangements address the structural premium attached to long and inflexible hours, a dynamic shown by Goldin (2014) to contribute to gender gaps due to the unequal care burden shouldered by women, hindering them from participating in longer hours at the workplace. **By altering working-time norms, these measures reduce care-related penalties that disproportionately affect women's earnings and progression.** They therefore engage distributive mechanisms within firms, even if indirectly.

The structured comeback programmes similarly extend beyond retraining women for career re-entry. Centralised CV matching and formalised re-entry pathways facilitated by the government shift part of the adjustment burden away from individual women and towards institutional labour market coordination. **Rather than treating career interruption as a purely private cost borne within households, the programme introduces intermediary support that bridges re-entry gaps. This is particularly significant given the gendered distribution of unpaid**

care work, which continues to shape labour force attachment. Women are far more likely than men to exit employment due to care responsibilities while seeking re-entry thereafter. The Labour Force Survey Report shows that 60.9% of women outside the labour force cite housework and family responsibilities as their primary reason for non-participation, compared with only 3.3% of men (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2025a).

These measures can be classified as redistribution-affirmative. They correct structural disadvantages within existing workplace arrangements. **However, they do not directly recalibrate wage-setting systems, internal pay ladders, or promotion criteria. Nor do they alter how authority is allocated within organisational hierarchies.** The deeper underlying issue of women still bearing the most responsibility for care work is also not directly addressed here and could only be remedied by a more transformative approach that falls within the transformative quadrants.

The Accelerator platform has wider potential than Malaysia's current implementation suggests. In other participating countries, including Mexico, Colombia, Egypt, Ecuador, Honduras, and Jordan, commitments extend to pay-gap monitoring, wage transparency and leadership representation (World Economic Forum, n.d.). These measures intervene directly in remuneration and decision-making power. In Panama, commitments have even translated into legislative reforms that institutionalise pay reporting and representation thresholds.

Malaysia's present approach, therefore, represents movement toward redistribution, but primarily at the level of work organisation and labour market re-entry. If gender inequality persists within internal pay structures and authority hierarchies, then policy must increasingly engage those mechanisms directly. The Accelerator provides the institutional vehicle to do so.

Minimum Wage as Redistribution-Affirmative in Practice

Although not designed as a gender policy, the minimum wage policy illustrates how redistribution-affirmative instruments can narrow gender pay gaps. By establishing a statutory wage floor, the minimum wage policy directly constrains the lower bound of remuneration. Comparative evidence shows that such interventions compress wage dispersion at the bottom of the distribution (DiNardo et al. 1995). Hence, the wage compression may also narrow the gender pay gap in the lower-paying segment. Malaysia's experience is consistent with this pattern. Minimum wages have narrowed gender gaps in lower-paying occupations.

Across all occupational levels, and in both 2014 and 2024, women consistently earned less than men (Figures 13 (a) and (b)). Managers and professionals, regardless of gender, remained above the high-pay threshold, while most semi- and low-skilled occupations, with the exception of clerical support workers, clustered around the low-pay threshold.

Figures 13: (a) and (b): Gender Pay Differentials (RM) by Occupational Level, Low-Pay and High-Pay Thresholds, Malaysia, 2014 and 2024



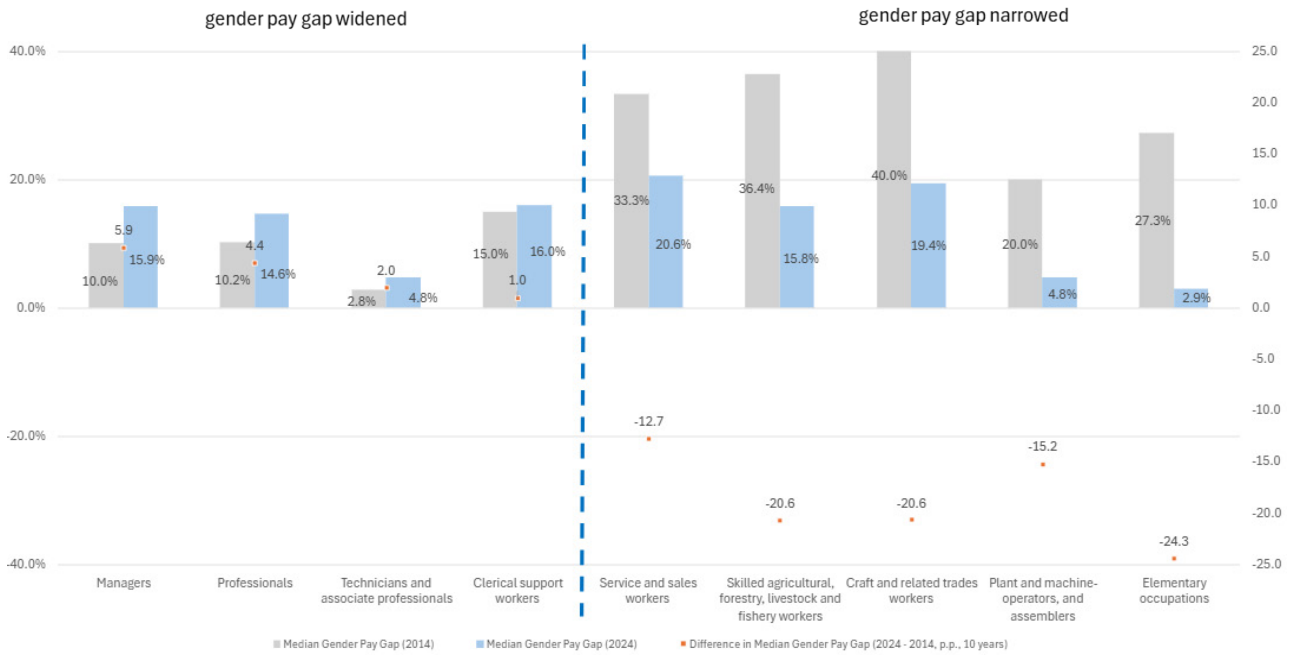
Source: Figure adapted from (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2025c)

Notes: Gender pay differentials are calculated as the difference between men's and women's median monthly earnings within each occupational level. Median earnings are used to reduce the influence of outliers. The levels of low- and high-paid employment follows the guidance from OECD (n.d.), where low pay is defined as earnings below two-thirds of the median and high pay as earnings above one-and-a-half times the median.

A comparison between 2014 and 2024, a decade defined by the implementation and successive increments of the national minimum wage levels, introduced in 2013 and raised incrementally to RM1,700 in 2025 (Minimum Wages Order 2024), reveals two diverging trends. Occupations

situated near the low-pay threshold experienced a substantial narrowing of gender pay gaps. In contrast, higher-earning occupational groups exhibited widening differentials (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Gender Pay Gap (%) by Occupational Level in 2014 and 2024, and Differences in the Gender Pay Gap (Percentage Points)



Source: Figure adapted from (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2025c)

Notes: The gender pay gap is calculated as the percentage difference between women's and men's median monthly earnings within each occupational level. Changes in the gender pay gap are expressed in percentage points and computed as the difference between the 2024 and 2014 gaps. A negative value indicates a narrowing of the gender pay gap, reflecting a lower gap in 2024 relative to 2014.

This is not a direct intervention targeted at the gender pay gap. Yet this demonstrates the effect of a direct redistributive intervention that could directly narrow the persistent gap. It is analytically revealing, as it demonstrates that gender pay gaps are responsive to institutional intervention; they are not fixed features of labour markets. When wage-setting mechanisms are directly altered, distributive outcomes shift.

The implication is clear. **If a general wage instrument can narrow gender gaps through direct intervention in wage-setting, then gender policy can similarly engage remuneration systems more explicitly.**

Beyond Affirmative Corrections: Addressing Structural Roots

Thus far, the discussion has focused on observable outcomes of gender inequality: lower labour force participation, persistent pay gaps, and under-representation in managerial roles. These disparities are measurable and demand policy attention. **Yet these outcomes are not isolated phenomena. They reflect deeper structural dynamics operating across both recognitional and redistributive dimensions.**

Much of gender inequalities today is sustained by the deeper socially embedded ordering of work that still perpetuates the gendering of work ideals. At the top of the list is the unresolved tension of production and social reproduction, where women are increasingly incorporated in the labour force without an effective restructuring of care norms (Fraser 2016). The reflected policy narrative, as identified in the 13th Malaysia Plan, still positions men as the primary breadwinners and women's inclusion in the workforce as an opportunity to support workforce expansion (Government of Malaysia 2025). Women are expected to participate in paid employment while continuing to bear primary responsibility for care and household labour. This dual expectation shapes working time, career continuity and earnings trajectories.

Reduced hours, employment interruptions and slower progression are therefore not simply individual choices but institutional consequences of how care is organised and valued within the economy.

Until men take up more domestic work responsibilities, or the provision of care services becomes more accessible to all, gender gaps will remain structural (England et al. 2020). Affirmative interventions, such as flexible working hours, only address the existing gendered care norms, but they do not alter them.

Transformative remedies would engage these foundations directly. Rather than correcting outcomes within existing arrangements, they would recalibrate how care responsibility is shared, how working time is structured, and how authority is distributed. While such reforms extend beyond the immediate scope of this paper, acknowledging their relevance is important. Establishing clarity between redistribution and recognition is a first analytical step. **Over the longer term, sustained progress will require policy attention not only to the observable surface gaps, but also to the structural conditions that reproduce them.**

Conclusion: Reframing Gender Economic Inequality

The dominant grammar of gender economic reform in Malaysia has been inclusion. More women into education. More women into work. More women into professional roles. Inclusion has served as both a diagnosis and a remedy.

This paper has argued that this grammar is insufficient.

When participation becomes the primary metric of equality, the structure of reward and authority recedes from view. Yet institutions do not merely admit individuals; they organise valuation. They distribute income, assign authority, and legitimise power. It is here that gender hierarchy persists.

The empirical paradoxes examined are not inconsistencies within an otherwise successful trajectory. They are evidence of a deeper structural tension. Recognition at the level of access can coexist with maldistribution at the level of reward. Formal inclusion can leave intact the institutional logics that differentiate whose work is valued, whose authority is presumed legitimate, and whose careers are allowed to compound.

The risk, therefore, is not policy failure. It is conceptual narrowing. By equating equality with entry, reform risks stabilising a model in which women are present but not proportionately powerful; credentialed but not proportionately rewarded.

Reframing gender economic inequality requires shifting the analytical centre of gravity. The question is not only how to increase women's participation, but how to reorganise the institutional mechanisms through which remuneration, progression and authority are allocated. Fraser's (1995) analytical distinction in framing types of gender inequalities and the appropriate interventions that best suit their addressing can help policies better diagnose the issues and design the best approach to tackle them. It allows the assessment to be wider and deeper than merely viewing gender inequality as the question of including more women in the room.

Equality is not simply achieved when barriers to entry fall. It is achieved when the terms of participation themselves are transformed.



Image generated by Lovart AI

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