

Women as Skilled Labour: a Review of Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

As an important sector in the economy of Malaysia, the prolong problem of shortage of local skilled labour which the construction is experiencing may affect the sustainability of the sector and impinge its significant roles. Currently, the industry has to import foreign workers in order to fulfil the demand for manual labour. Although the government has implemented various strategies including attracting new entries among local youth so that they can be trained in construction academies, the problem still occurs. It indicates that there is a need now for a new strategy as an alternative to the present approaches. At this instance, the strategy which has not formally been applied in the construction industry of Malaysia is attraction of local women to become construction skilled labour. This paper presents a review on the issue, challenges and prospect for women to be attracted as skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia. This paper suggested that there is potential for Malaysian women to become manual trades workers based on the literature findings that women have the capability and was once a significant skilled labour in the construction industry.

Keywords: construction industry; foreign workers; skilled labour; tradeswomen

1. Introduction

The growth of a national economy is partly depending on the strength and contribution of the construction industry. Researchers and writers consistently tell us that the importance of the construction in the economy of Malaysia can be seen at least from four perspectives i.e. its contribution to the infrastructure development and national GDP, regulating various sectors and creating employment opportunities in the labour market. With the aim to become a developed nation by the year 2020 and a calibre nation with a par excellent mindset in the year 2050, the construction industry of Malaysia has significant roles in providing the infrastructure needed in order to achieve the aspirations. Much of the basic infrastructure that is needed in helping socio-economic development such as hospitals, schools, townships, highways, roads and telecommunication systems are provided by the construction industry [1–5].

Apart from that, the construction sector is actively contributing to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) between 3% to 5% annually [6]. In 2017, the total value of construction work done in the first quarter recorded an increment from RM 32.6 billion (Q4: 2016) to RM 35.1 billion [7]. The high production value of this industry shows that there had been rapid construction activity in Malaysia triggered both by the government and private sectors. When the industry is proactive, it will essentially stimulate growth in other sectors. There will be demand in other sectors including manufacturing like cement, steel, paints, glass and timber as well as heavy equipment and machinery. This is in line with the suggestion in the work of other researchers who focused on the importance of the construction industry and suggested that the construc-

tion sector is a crucial industry having strong backward and forward growth linkages with various sectors in an economy [2, 5, 8]. Other than that, the importance of construction can be assessed in terms of the number of employment. As present, about 1 million people are working in the construction industry of Malaysia from the country's total labour force [9]. It also creates a multiplier effect on the employment in other industries including manufacturing, financial services and professional services [8]. All the significant roles which the construction industry is performing to the economy of Malaysia suggest that the constraints which inhibit the sector need to be addressed to ensure the industry continues to sustain. Sustainable construction is defined as "creating a healthy built environment using resource-efficient, ecologically based principles" [3]. Resources in the context of construction refer to materials, machinery and skilled manpower [4]. Hence, the ability to manage resources which include the local material, machinery and skilled labour will ensure the sustainability of the construction industry of Malaysia.

As for now, the construction industry of Malaysia is still a labour intensive industry and highly depends on skill workers to perform work at sites [3, 10]. It raises an important question now on how the construction can increase the number of local skilled labour so that the industry can continue to sustain? This, will become the focus of this article.

2. Issues Impeding Sustainable Construction

The problem of shortage of local skilled labour has existed in the construction industry of Malaysia since the 1980s contributed by the rapid infrastructure development which the country was undergoing [11, 12]. Ever since that, there is a mismatch between

the demand and the number of local skilled labour which the construction industry managed to produce. To fulfil the demand for manual labour, the construction industry has to import foreign workers from the less developed countries to become workforce [13]. The approach, although manage to reduce the stress on the need of manual labour, it must only be made as a short-term solution. This is because the influx of foreign workers is causing a lot of socio-economic problem to the country [14].

The low number of local skilled labour happened for a number of widely understood reasons. The weak point which lead to the poor attraction and retention is the industry's poor image. Some negative perceptions about construction include '3D image' - the industry is dirty, dangerous and difficult [3, 15, 16] has unattractive nature of work for instance long working hours including during the weekends and holidays [17, 18] and no guarantee of long-term employment [3, 19]. However, to re-compensate on all the weaknesses, generally construction workers are paid higher than comparable workers in other industries [13]. Nevertheless, due to lack of efforts to highlight the advantages which the industry can offer, construction at all times is notorious of having poor job prospect. As a result, parents, school counsellors and teachers were found hardly to promote construction jobs to anybody. Programs which related to construction activities were also found to be lacking at schools [19, 20]. The situation need to change especially when the government is now actively driving forward the transformation of Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) in the country in the attempt to produce more skilled workforce [21]. The conventional way of acquiring skills is learning by doing. Limited initiatives from school will only limit the knowledge of students on job as skilled worker but maintaining the misconception. Students will not be aware on the availability of high value-added jobs within the construction industry which promises better wages and prospect [22]. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the local youth in Malaysia is said to rather being unemployed than working in the construction industry [23].

Apart from the issue on image, there is a question of how well the employers are taking care on the welfare of their local workers. Employers demand for workers who are willing to work extra hours, obedience, willing to accept low wages and lack of fastidious. These conditions could only be accepted by the foreign workers [13]. Given the relatively low attention about the welfare of local workers, many Malaysian workers chose to immigrate to higher wage jurisdiction countries like Singapore, Japan and Taiwan [12] or work in other industries which gives better offer [12, 13]. There are still plenty of other issues surrounding the construction industry which make the sector unattractive to the local people. They have been summarized and presented in Table 1.

The government and the policy makers have made several initiatives to address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour. Numerous construction training centres have been established and run by various institutions in Malaysia like the National Youth Skills Institute (IKBN), National Youth High Skills Institute (IKTBN), Training Institution of Manpower Department (ILJTM), MARA Education Institutions (IPMA), and the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) [24] with the aim to train and improve local talent continuously and make them competitive, able to secure good job and income and enjoy a better standard of living [25]. The establishment of the institutions also seeks to close the skills gaps faced by the industry in line with the government's desire to make Malaysia a developed and high-income nation. By the year 2025, it is expected that the number of skilled workforce in Malaysia will reach 300,000 people [25]. However, for as long as the issues described in this paper persist, the problem of shortage of local skilled labour will prolong and may affect the sustainability of the construction industry in Malaysia.

In general, workers in the construction industry are traditionally male [26, 27]. Since the problem of shortage of local skilled labour is still on-going, there is a need now to review the present approach being used in promoting this job so that more local youth would be attracted to work in the construction industry of

Malaysia. Suggestion has been made in the Latham Report [28] and re-highlighted in the ILO Report that the [29] construction industry must attract the group of minorities in the attempt to increase the number of workforce. This include attracting women to become skilled labour. The construction industry must widen up the pool in the search for new talent, and women must be attracted and seen as a prospect.

3. Challenges in Attracting Women to Become Skilled Labour

The involvement of women as skilled labour would bring a lot of benefits to the construction industry in specific and economy as a whole. Apart from addressing the problem of shortage of local skilled labour, the entrance of women may change the society's negative perceptions towards the construction industry. In a study which focused on the roles of education system indicates that the construction industry's masculine and technocratic image among students can be soften with the existence of more women. This can make the job popular to both male and female [30]. In other study, in some province in the UK, the men are improving and reducing the patriarchal culture due to the presence of women [31]. Another benefit which was found is diversification can make construction companies to be more representative of customers and clients who keep them in business [31, 32]. The industry will be more innovative in solving problems by getting the viewpoints from both genders [31]. Other than that, offering job as construction trade workers can become a mean for poverty eradication [33]. In relation to the construction industry of Malaysia, job as skilled labour has helped many people to move out of poverty and employees are able to earn between RM3,000 and RM6,000 a month [34]. This can become the opportunity to increase the income of women since they are found to dominate the low wage general and supportive occupations more than men.

Notably, there are many challenges in order to attract women to become skilled labour for the construction industry of Malaysia. The first point is on the social perception. Customs and traditions have set what are the best occupations for men and women from early age of a child [35, 36]. Girls are often described as suitable for taking up women's traditional jobs described to be in the private sphere of the home and in nurturing roles [35, 37, 38]. Women are also said to be more suitable with jobs that do not require physical strength, not involving machine, requiring precision, and

Table 1: Issues Surrounding the Construction Industry

Factors	Authors
'3D' image - dirty, dangerous and difficult	[3, 33, 39]
Unfriendly working environment	[40, 41]
Long working hours	[18, 42]
Poor safety and high accidents	[1, 8, 43-45]
Low wages	[1, 8, 45, 46]
Long duration of training	[47]
Nature of job which require to handle difficult construction machineries	
Nature of job that is physical demanding	[17, 18, 48]
Nature of job is highly expose to hot weather	[49]
Low status job	[50]
Job is highly exposed to loud noises and executed in poor lighting	[51]

in clean and tidy work environment [52]. Meanwhile, the male was said more suitable to participate in adventurous, challenging, and highly-regarded masculine jobs [53]. The idea on what jobs suitable for male and female will influence parents and school teachers in giving advice for the girls in career selection. Given that construction has always been associated with unpleasant image and working condition as previously discussed, the initiative to encourage women to become skilled labour may be challenged by the society's impression on the appropriateness of women to work in this kind of environment.

The second point is on the level of awareness. It is difficult to assess to what extent women are aware on the nature and job scope of a skilled labour due to lack of availability of empirical study that investigate the female of understanding on this job. However, when the advertisement pertaining to opportunity to become skilled labour or to join the construction academy is portraying masculine image, women may have the thought that the job is only suitable for the male (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Masculine image used by the CIDB to attract local apprentice [54]

4. A Step before the Final Submission

Despite many challenges which have been discussed, it cannot be denied that in the global context, women have made their ways to become skilled labour in the construction industry which contest the perception and tradition that construction is not the job for women. The involvement of women as skilled labour can be found as early as the 13th century in respond to the desire of parents to inherit their construction-related business to their daughters [55, 56]. History also shown that women were once significant skilled manpower in the European countries during the two world wars to replace men who has to involve in the battle [26, 57]. In South Africa, the main workforce for the construction industry was women. The men and older boys on the other hand involve in other economic activities at great distances from their villages. However, the culture had change after the coming of the Europeans and they have made construction as the male's domain [47]. In India, the image of women working in the construction industry performing harsh and physical demanding job is common [58]. Women in India seek the opportunity to become skill labour to earn better income and improve their standard of living [58]. Now, women have been seen as a prospect to address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour which the construction industry of India is facing [59].

The fact that job as construction skilled labour offer higher income than many blue collar job had motivated many other women including in the U.S. A feminist movement was formed to specifically encourage women to work in this field in order to generate better income among women [60]. As present, the number of organization for women manual trades is increasing and they are actively established by the non-government organization (NGO). Some examples can be seen in the UK. The Women on the Tools (WofT) were formed with the aim to start working with building trades and construction industry employers in helping them to

recruit and retain tradeswomen as a response to the current skills shortage [61]. In South Africa there is South African Women in Construction (SAWIC) which aims to address all matters related to women in the construction industry so that women can be encouraged and retain in this sector especially as skilled labour [62].

In summary, there are many interesting results indicating the potential of women to become skilled labour for the construction industry which have been reported. Hence, this indicate that there is a prospect for women in Malaysia to be attracted to become skilled labour for the construction industry. However, the initiatives to attract women to become skilled labour requires freeing of women from the constraints imposed by the societies on what women can or cannot do during career decision making. The discussion also highlighted that the poor responses towards construction is partly due to poor knowledge on the job prospect as construction skilled labour. There must be some initiatives from the government and the policy makers not only to inform about how to become skilled labour but also documenting and disseminating on who has become successful in this field.

Yearly, the data produced by the Department of Statistics Malaysia shows that there will be approximately 200,000 women unemployed in the labour market [9, 63–65]. Based on the data in 2016, majority of the unemployed women are having secondary level academic achievement [9]. This qualification is sufficient for a person to enter any construction training institute [24]. This criterion is another point that make it possible for women to become skilled labour. Apart from addressing the problem of shortage of local skilled labour, attracting women as manual trades can also help to reduce the unemployed rates in Malaysia.

It cannot be denied that career choices of young people are influenced by many factors from events in early childhood to parents, peers and career advisers [66, 67]. Accordingly, adolescent is the most critical period in which the important decision on future career are made [66–69]. Hence, promoting the job as skilled labour require a formulation of a strategy so that the level of awareness of female adolescents on the job can be increased. Women must be encouraged to seek employment opportunities they have never considered to keep pace with the needs of the labour market.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a need now for the construction industry of Malaysia to change it approach in attracting local youth to become skilled labour. There is a need now to acknowledge that women are potential new talent to be trained to become skilled labour. There is no way the construction industry can address the problem of shortage of local skilled labour if the focus is only on the male youth and half of the population being ignored.

This paper highlighted on the issues surrounding the construction industry which make jobs in this field unattractive to the local youth. The construction industry in general has always being associated with poor image and because of that, parents or school teachers rarely encourage anyone to become manual workers in this sector. Other sectors were found by societies as more decent and rewarding and this is partly related with the treatment of main contractors who always sought to maximize profit and reduce the company's overhead. Eventually, the welfare of the workers was not well managed and this easily divert the interest of local youth to choose job in other sectors.

Culture and perceptions were found to be the challenges in order to attract women to work as construction trade workers. The culture in the construction industry need to be changed in order to reduce the negative perception towards construction and attract women to become skilled labour. Apart from that, initiative to recruit women into construction must be started at secondary

schools and conversing with students about the prospects offered within the industry. to encourage women to work in the construction industry, there must be strong supports from both government, and construction organizations.

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