

## Book Review

*Where Women Matters*. Edited by Rachel Samuel and Rohana Ariffin. Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, 2022, 131 pp.

Women primarily play significant roles in the household, as daughter, wife, and mother, but how significant are they in the economic, political, and social realm? Do women have the freedom to make decisions and opportunities to develop their potentials? The answers are encapsulated in Rachel Samuel and Rohana Ariffin's edited book, *Where Women Matters*. The editors' main arguments are, although women in Malaysia have achieved major milestones in social development (especially education and health) and economic progress, the existence of gender gap is still apparent in the workforce and poverty persist, especially among female single-headed households. The book promises to review the challenges faced by the women from different positions and situations.

The book is divided into three broad categories – 1) Economic perspective, 2) Media perspective, and 3) Legal perspective. The economic perspective has three chapters that focus on the concept of capabilities, feminisation of poverty using the capabilities approach, and marginalisation of Indian women (where a specific case study is being used). The media perspective has two chapters, and the topics under this theme have brought a fresh and relevant outlook on the impact of media on the image of women in the modern society in Malaysia. The legal perspective deliberates on the issues of gender equality in marriage, divorce, workplace, and marginalised women.

Chapter 1 on “Gender, Capabilities and Institutions” discusses Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and the role of institutions in determining the real opportunities that are available in the society. The Capability Approach is significant as it advocates individuals' choices and freedom of choice to function effectively. The author contends that the Capability Approach needs to incorporate institutionalist perspectives within its gender sensitive framework to expand opportunities and choices to all. The institutions determine what opportunities and choices are available for the people because they establish social rules that guide and structure social interactions. Institutions hold the key to enable communities to attain social,

political, and economic opportunities. Chapter 2 focuses on “Feminisation of Poverty in Malaysia” and addresses major issues pertaining to gender poverty, such as increasing number of female-headed households, better workplace practices to improve female workforce participation, and the drawback of using income-based approaches to measure poverty. The chapter encapsulated the Capability Approach theory by providing some recommendations to strengthen human capabilities, such as a well-designed social programmes and effective anti-poverty strategies that are gender sensitive. “Marginalised Indian Women in Malaysia” in Chapter 3 describes the profiles of poor Indian women, such as low income, low education, domestic violence, and deviance among children. Additionally, the chapter highlights the need for affordable and decent homes, especially for single mothers, the need to increase living wages and provide quality community childcare and education centres to help the underprivileged women to actively participate in social and economic activities.

Under the broad category of the media perspective, Chapter 4, the “Representation of Sisters in Islam (SIS) in Malaysian Online Print Media” perceives the role of SIS in challenging the *fatwa* (religious doctrine) and religious conservatism. Three mainstream Malaysian news media were examined in terms of their media coverage and narratives regarding SIS, namely *Utusan Online*, *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini*. *Utusan Online*’s narratives illustrated strong patriarchal perspective and were more inclined towards conservative approach to Islam, which is contrary to SIS’s. *The Star Online* and *Malaysiakini* supported SIS and presented SIS as a defender of Muslim women’s rights and social justice. The SIS case study underlines two important points; first, the politicisation of Islam to garner support from the Malay Muslims and second, the changing views of the contemporary Muslim society in the country. Chapter 5 presents “New Media and Public Perception of Women in Malaysia,” which focuses on women’s images in the public domain, especially women in politics. The online platform has been used to spread conservatism and strong conformity to images of ‘decent’ women as portrayed by Islam. Many women in the public domain, especially Muslim women, feel the need to conform to ‘proper appearance’ to avoid from being condemned by the “netizens” and fear of losing their political positions and their public influence.

The legal perspective begins with Chapter 6, “Gender and the Workplace: Equality or Discrimination.” The chapter discusses in-depth

the meaning of discrimination, particularly gender discrimination faced by women at the workplace. It displayed prominent International Conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) that prohibit any distinction, exclusion based on colour, race, gender, political opinion, and addresses fair and equal footing for all in politics, socio-economy, and culture. This chapter also includes Islamic principles to illustrate similar principles to uphold the values of equality that should be given to humankind and oppose any forms of distinction between gender, race, colour, and status. However, the author argued that women still encounter discrimination in employment and exploitation at workplace even though they have developed and gained various skills that are up to par with men. Chapter 7 examines the issues of marriage and divorce in Malaysia, with some discussion on the approach of the civil and Shariah law in determining legal action, financial and child support; and dividing matrimonial assets in divorce cases for Muslims and non-Muslims. Most importantly, the chapter highlights financial status and concerns as a major factor for divorce. Hence, the author recommends couples to prepare themselves with financial knowledge and be transparent in discussing household income, their expectations in financial management in households, debts, and spending habits for a better marriage preparation. Chapter 8 focuses on “Marginalised Women in Prisons.” It takes a closer look at the profiles of women offenders, their history of delinquent behaviours and exposure to violence that has led to their criminal offending path. It also highlights the roles of these women as daughters and wives who have been neglected and abused, and mothers who felt the regret for neglecting their children due to the circumstances surrounding them. Four cases of women offenders presented in the chapter show the exploitation that happened to these women in their earlier life that led them to a path of self-destruction. The women in prison are given skill training for employment and rehabilitation for the reintegration process into the society. However, the success of the rehabilitation, the use of skill training and reintegration into the society is still uncertain.

All eight chapters have presented unheard voices of marginalised women that may not be commonly discussed. The organisation of chapters was carefully planned by the editors, and this is shown especially in the first chapter as it laid a good foundation for the rest of the chapters. The emphasis

on the Capabilities Approach theory creates awareness to the readers on the importance of providing opportunities and choices for individuals, especially the vulnerable group.

*Where Women Matters* has brought a fresh new perspective by incorporating the role of media in projecting and influencing women's image and decisions. However, the area covered by the media was too brief, wherein it only highlights important opinions and arguments brought forward by non-profit organisation, such as SIS and briefly examines media features on public perception of women political figures in Malaysia.

The strength of the book is in the way the authors illustrate their practical observations and real experiences dealing with the disadvantaged women in each chapter. The chapters are easy to read and appealing. The way the book has been organised and written is made simple yet valuable for the public and academicians to use as a source of reference. Readers with no common knowledge of the legal system in Malaysia can easily understand and apply the basic knowledge of Shariah and civil law on marriage and divorce matters. The case studies found in most of the chapters help readers to appreciate the experiences faced by women who were deprived, discriminated, and neglected throughout their lives. Overall, the book adds as a valuable contribution to the literature in the discipline.

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