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Women's Work:
Gender and
Labour Relations
in Malaysia

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1. Introduction

Labour, its availability and control, is a central part of production and the transformation of social relations. Malaysia is unique for the study of labour and gender relations for the following reasons.

Malaysia's population in the nineteenth century was sparse and scattered, consequently labour rather than land was the principal source of wealth. This influenced a variety of economic and social relationships, authority patterns, patron-client relationships and slavery.

The integration of Malaysia into the international economy in the colonial period led to more economic activity and employment opportunities while natural population growth remained low. Labour was required for mines, plantations and government undertakings. Millions of workers immigrated to Malaysia to fill the many different gaps associated with the international division of labour. The emergence of wage labour caused the growth of an internal labour market.

In the post World-War-II era of global trade, internationalisation of the Malaysian economy and industrialisation, a new international division of labour emerged which was associated with the "feminisation of labour" and the mass mobilisation of women in paid work.

This paper focuses on the following themes:

- * Labour, labour relations and gender in the 19th century;
- * Gender and the ethnic division of labour associated with "freer" labour;
- * Industrialisation and the new international division of labour.

2. Peninsular Malaysia¹ in the Nineteenth Century

In the early nineteenth century, the Malay states were characterised by sparse populations and large, unsettled regions which made manpower rather than land the principal source of value. Malay society was based on hierarchically determined personal relationships, which influenced a variety of economic and social relationships including authority patterns, patron-client relationships, peonage and slavery. The state was informal and transient and administrative control was weak and diffuse because rulers dominated a hierarchy of lesser territorial chiefs or semi-autonomous tributaries.

The fundamental unit of the state was the village. A village, be it lowland, fishing or upland, comprised several families normally held together by kinship and personal ties. The basic organisational unit of production tended to be the family although some activities were organised on a larger, village basis. The peasant economy centred on rice production but was augmented by vegetable growing and fishing. The Malays practised two types of cultivation, swidden and sedentary. Swidden cultivation (*nnhuma* and *ladang*) involved periodic clearing of forest then at least one season of cultivation of land which was then abandoned to revert to forest. Sedentary agriculture (*sawah* or *bendang*) was undertaken by permanently settled

1. In this paper, discussion is confined principally to Peninsular Malaysia.

communities which primarily planted wet rice crops and other food on adjacent land.

Cultivation of *sawah* (wet rice fields) occurred on the riverine lowlands and coastal areas of the Malay peninsula. The larger and better endowed deltas of Kedah and Kelantan had a long history of permanent peasant settlement based on *sawah* cultivation and were more densely populated than other river valleys.

The waterways, riverine and maritime, served as the primary means of inter-village communication and transport. They were supplemented by land routes through the dense equatorial forest. It is therefore not surprising that the territorial boundaries of several Malay states (known as *negeri*) tended to correspond to the boundaries of river basins. Ease of travel and communication, provided by the course of a river and its tributaries, facilitated the assertion of political control backed by military power. A sultan, the ruler of a Malay state, usually chose a strategic territorial location for himself and his followers. This was usually at a river mouth or an important confluence. Subject to the sultan, at least nominally, were several levels of territorial chiefs. Formal political hierarchies varied in different Malay states. If the state provided economic infrastructure, such as an irrigation system, it had more control over a permanently settled population so power tended to be more centralised, usually in the sultan. In riverine states the ruling class typically obtained revenue by taxing riverine commerce. This usually involved the scattered location of chiefs at strategic points on a river's course which ensured decentralised power, diminishing the titular head of state's real authority.

A state's prosperity depended upon its ruler's ability to extract produce and taxes from the peasantry. The ruler was chief trader. He had monopoly rights on trade and power to impose levies, on gambling and goods' consumption, and he auctioned them to local dignitaries or foreign merchants for money. Thus, various types and combinations of economic institution in states enabled rulers to acquire wealth and distribute it among their followers. Of prime importance was the labour relationship.

The main pressure underlying state formation was villagers' desire for protection from external forces. Protection required centrally controlled human resources, a resource and labour pool which expanded organisational capacity. The principal component of the labour pool was *corvée*, forced labour. *Corvée* was the subject class' "obligation" to the ruling class. The forced levy of men was effected by village headmen or district chiefs and was generally utilised for irregular tasks of cooperation on a large scale, including public-works construction and tin mining. *Corvée*'s arbitrary nature disrupted agriculture and reduced productivity. Nevertheless, states had insufficient resources to enforce unreasonable demands regularly nor did they want to encourage people to flee to neighbouring territories or transfer their allegiance to rival states.

The other two categories of labour relations were slavery and debt bondage. Captives in war or raiding expeditions were usually enslaved by the raiding party. In the trading cities, merchants and officials had large retinues of slaves and there were laws to prevent slaves from escaping since slaves were regarded as property. Bondage was a consequence of vertical obligations in society. The wealth of the rich lay in the dependent man (or woman) power they could gather around them.

The states' inherent socio-economic relationships which prevented savings' accumulation also fostered the creation of bondage. For the poor, security and opportunity were acquired through bondage which had monetary value. Men and women were vulnerable to indebtedness, especially when they required money for the payment of bride prices and other rituals. Systems for bonding were thus largely based on debt. Bondage was transferable and even tradable, but in practice the right to redemption was little more than nominal.² Women could also be rounded up for concubinage or domestic service in households of the ruling elite.

Slaves and bondsmen performed at least three main activities: they made up their masters' retinues to produce goods and services in response to specific commissions or for sale; they performed domestic, agricultural or mining tasks; or they were "hired out" by their masters to contribute to the subsistence of their larger households. Compared to *corvée*, slavery and forms of bondage were the preferred categories of labour control and labour relations. Free labour, willing to work for a wage, was extremely scarce and seen as demeaning.

3. *The Household and the Division of Labour*

The household was the basic unit of labour with all members undertaking the various tasks of cultivation. Each member, including young children and grandparents, contributed to family wealth by labouring in production tasks often according to age or gender. In the extremely arduous *ladang* (swidden) cultivation, the task of felling, slashing and burning was usually undertaken by men while women cleared brushwood with the help of older children. Swiddening required no heavy tools since there was no ploughing or harrowing so there was less differentiation of tasks according to gender. Men and women shared the task of planting. The men poked seed holes with dibble sticks while the women followed behind, placing seeds in the dibble holes. The women, perhaps with the help of children, also covered seeds with earth. Weeding, a periodic chore, was normally done by women. Harvesting was done by the whole household although it appears to have been principally the women's task. Apart from rice, the typical household also planted vegetables, yams, maize and fruit trees. The chores and harvest were shared within the household.

In *sawah* (wet rice field) cultivation, involving ploughs and other tools, the division of labour was much more defined by gender. The men ploughed, harrowed and (bunded?). Transplanting was women's work. They inserted rice plants, sometimes with a simple hand tool, in the rice fields. Women also weeded the crop and harvested it. Men threshed the grain while women winnowed and pounded it. Children often helped their mothers by weeding, collecting firewood or fetching water.

Generally, the division of labour in both types of cultivation was not rigid since men and women performed most cultivation tasks as a family unit. Since different phases of the agricultural production cycle required large amounts of labour for short periods, it was the

2. Anthony Reid (ed.), *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia* (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1983), pp. 8-11; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) p. 129.

general practice of different households in a settlement to pool labour resources. Labour sharing was reciprocal. The value system of Malay society emphasised *gotong-royong* (cooperation), *usaha* (labour) and conformity.³

In fishing communities, women tended to play a more supplementary role. Tradition decreed that only men could be fishermen, who brought home the daily catch. Nevertheless, women mended nets and sorted and processed the fish caught by men. They also braided nets and shared the task of selling fish in local markets.

Apart from agricultural production, domestic industry was well developed in Malay peasant society. Basic carpentry, weaving and mat and basket plaiting was practised by Malays. An allocation of tasks was also evident in this sphere of activity. In a typical village, men built their houses using tools such as the *parang* and the *beliang*. They also collected timber, *atap* and rattan from forests. The women weaved *atap* thatch for the roofs and weaved mats from rattan and other materials, such as pandanus (*mengkuang*). While it was common for most communities to produce their own domestic clothes, in the east-coast states of Kelantan and Trengganu, there was a specialised cloth-weaving industry for local and external markets. Women produced hand-woven textiles and their weaving skills were passed from mother to daughter. Men's involvement in textiles was usually limited to designing patterns and setting up looms, while women weaved and dyed. Village industry was essential to village economy since it provided peasants the goods necessary for their livelihood.

A village's economy, though largely self-sufficient and sometimes in surplus, did not produce all a village needed. Fishing communities, for example, bartered fish for rice from rice-producing communities. Commerce was thus a necessary feature of peasant life and it had local, regional, inter-regional and international dimensions. Locally, it involved informal, simple, barter transactions. For example, the Malays exchanged cloths, knives or other goods for forest products from aboriginals in the uplands.⁴ There were also periodic and rotating local markets where trade was nearly always conducted by women, and serviced by peripatetic petty traders.

Regionally, more-developed, permanent markets were concentrated in larger settlements and port towns. These markets offered a wide range of goods, including food, baskets and cloth. Vendors were usually female. To quote a Malay writer, who documented conditions at Kuala Trengganu, "When the sun begins to decline, the women in the town and from the orchards and upcountry come with baskets of food and clothing on their heads. They come to the market, sit and sell [...] and at sunset, they all go home [...]"⁵

International commerce was largely monopolised by the rulers and tightly restricted. It represented a ruler's major source of wealth and included taxation on internal commerce. Mineral resources, for example tin in the west-coast states, were important sources of

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3. Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Grading of Occupational Prestige Among the Malays of Malaysia", *JMBRAS*, 41, 1 (1968), p. 153; cf. R.E. Elson, *The End of the Peasantry in Southeast Asia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997) chs 1 and 3.
 4. P.J. Begbie, *The Malayan Peninsula* [1834] (repr. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1967)) pp. 8-9.
 5. Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir, Munshi, *Kesah Pelayaran Abdullah*, trans. by A.E. Coope, *The Voyage of Abdullah: A Translation from the Malay* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1949) p. 19.

wealth for local rulers. While the trade of these commodities was restricted to the ruler and his circle, it affected peasant life and peasant production. In tin-producing areas, peasants had to work in tin mines after each rice harvest. Men and women worked under *kerah* (corvée) conditions, organised by territorial chiefs.

Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, all family members contributed to producing the things necessary for family survival. While task allocation differed according to the social division of labour, the value of men's work and women's work in relation to production was the same (they both produced use values). Society thus acknowledged women's twin roles of production and reproduction for community survival. Nevertheless, it must be noted that this did not give women better status than men because cultural attitudes invariably gave women's roles and work less status than men's.

4. Colonialism and the integration of Malaysia into the international economy: The transformation of labour in the late nineteenth century to 1940

The distinguishing feature of peasant labour relations in the nineteenth century was their highly personal and informal form of organisation. Although there was a "loose" division of labour by gender, it was fluid and let women access a broad range of activities. The integration of Malaysia into the international economy, the emergence of wage labour and the social change this precipitated resulted in a redefinition of the role women performed in their households and communities. This altered society's perception of women's contributions, ultimately leading to an erosion of the position of women in Malaysian society.

British expansion in Peninsular Malaysia started with the acquisition of three territories, Penang, Melaka and Singapore, in the Straits of Melaka between 1786 and 1824. These territories, grouped together as the Straits Settlements (SS), were important commercial-port towns. Straits merchants viewed the Malay states as an important hinterland with two major attractions: tin and the capacity for agricultural enterprise. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, protracted conflicts over mining on the peninsula – involving Chinese capitalists, their secret societies and Malay territorial chiefs with mixed alliances – provided reason for the British to extend their rule over the Malay States. Between 1874 and 1914, the British gradually took control of the entire area now known as Peninsular Malaysia.

British colonial dominance of the Malay peninsula transformed the basis of Malay political structure. While formal authority was centralised in the name of the sultans, British officials took over effective political and economic control. The economic basis of the Malay ruling class was eroded with the abolition of slavery and corvée labour and with the transfer of the rulers' taxation rights to the colonial authorities. The country acquired many of the basic characteristics of its present economy: commercialised mineral and agricultural production; an institutionalised bureaucracy; an effective legal and administrative system; a sound financial system; infrastructure; and a government oriented towards the promotion of material progress.

Colonial rule precipitated three major changes in Malaysia. First, the formation of a global market, shaped by industrial economies' needs, generated an accelerated demand for

Southeast Asian agricultural commodities, particularly those associated with industrial processing and manufacturing. Second, technical changes that dramatically lowered the cost of long-distance bulk transport and the opening of new transport routes facilitated the movement of these commodities to Europe and the United States. Third, British imperialism resulted in the creation of a new state with precisely delineated boundaries, an internal dynamic which had a permanency lacking in the indigenous states, a new style of administration and institutional structures to oversee various aspects of government and a new intensity of governance.

The changes had a major impact on labour relations. First, the British introduced a radically new approach to land ownership and use. Ultimate control was vested in the state, and legal systems of tenure developed which granted land rights. This led to the introduction of the plantation system with its relationship between production organisation and work-force character. The commoditization of land also affected the dynamics of large mines and mining labour. Consequently, property rights over land became more important than property rights over people, affecting not only indigenous people but also migrant communities. Second, the growth of Britain's power over the two great neighbouring centres of population, India and China, had major implications for overcoming labour shortages in Malaysia. Third, the development of rail and road networks and cities to service the export sector created urban-labour demand for administrative, technical and other tasks.

All these developments marked the beginning of a period of change for Malaysia in the international division of labour as it essentially became a producer and exporter of primary products and an importer of manufactured goods.

In the process of colonialism and development of capitalist economic relations in Malaya, the productive conditions of the pre-capitalist society changed gradually, creating the basis for a new type of society where labour became a marketable commodity. This had three important consequences for Malaysia: first, an ethnic division of labour emerged, with immigrant labour concentrated in capitalist production; second, Malay peasants were brought into closer contact with the market economy; and third, the allocation of tasks by gender became institutionalised. The colonial state deliberately chose to differentiate labour along racial lines. This allowed the authorities to play off one racial group against another and enabled them to break any group's monopoly control of labour supply. More importantly, it made sense to stop any group (especially the Chinese) increasing its numerical strength which could pose a political threat to the state.⁶

As early as the eighteenth century, local rulers encouraged the immigration of Chinese labourers to overcome labour shortages in their states. The Chinese pioneered tin and gold mining and the cultivation of several commercial crops. This wave of Chinese immigration was an independent movement. The Chinese established a range of associations to regulate their internal affairs and relations with external political authorities. In mining communities, the Chinese *kongsi* were resilient organisations in a frontier society based on bonds of brotherhood and partnership in economic activity. *Kongsi* leaders strengthened

6. R.N. Jackson, citing *The Selangor Journal*, 4 (1895), in *Immigrant Labour and the Development of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer, 1961) p. 438.

their hold over workers through the triads, secret societies (*hui*). Although *kongsi*'s main purpose was economic, they maintained community law and order and preserved Chinese cultural identity through ancestor worship and traditional festivals.

From the start, Chinese labourers were recruited in western Malay states by an essentially personal system and were controlled by economic and extra-economic means. Chinese workers were imported under the onerous "credit-ticket" system, whereby Chinese-coolie brokers paid the expenses of the *sinkheh* (new immigrant). A *sinkheh* was held on arrival in the Straits Settlements, usually in Singapore, until the debt incurred by him was paid off by an employer in exchange for a contract for his service for a specified period. The transaction was conducted between broker and employer with the worker usually unaware of his employer or location and conditions of work. He could not change employers. The prices offered for *sinkheh* varied with labour requirements and reflected different recruitment networks.

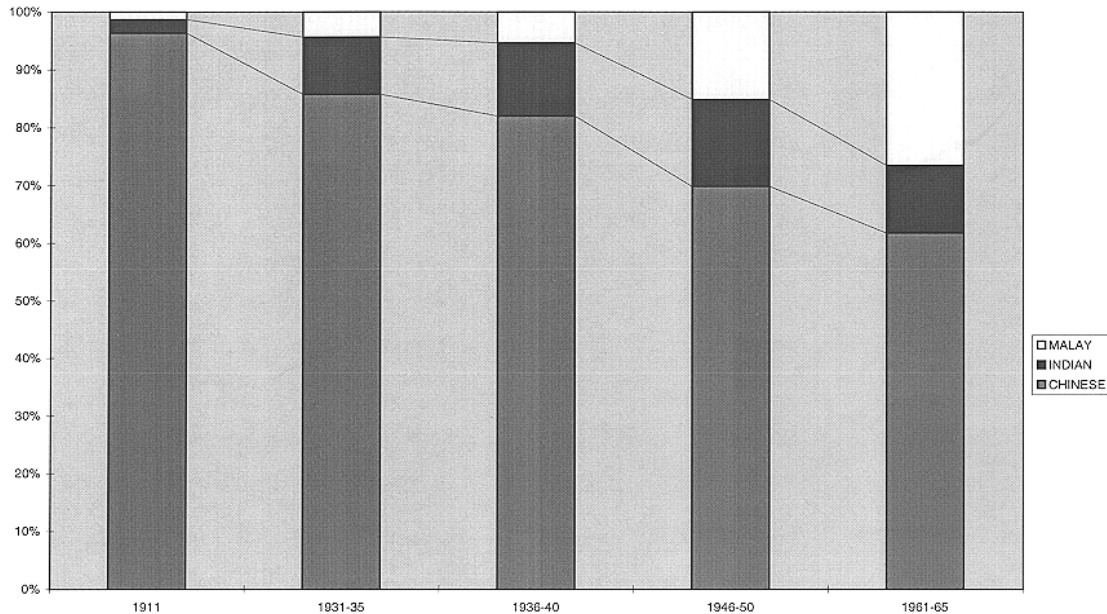
Chinese dominated tin mining in the western Malay states mainly because technological conditions favoured Chinese mining methods and labour organisation until the first decade of the twentieth century. Cheap Chinese labour let Chinese-owned mines produce at lower costs than mines employing less-labour intensive techniques. Besides the recruitment system, Chinese labour was controlled by secret society, subjected to the "truck system" and exploited under the revenue farm system. The banning of secret societies, the exhaustion of known accessible surface deposits and the increased demand for labour reduced *kongsi* leaders' power over workers. The demise of the credit-ticket system of indentured labour also reduced entrepreneurs' hold over labour. The credit-ticket system of indentured labour recruitment was abolished in Perak in 1894, and in Selangor and Negri Sembilan in 1895. It was replaced, in the Labour Code of 1895, by written contracts for specified periods. In 1881, 36.7 per cent of Chinese immigrants arriving in Singapore and Penang had their fares paid by other parties; by 1890 this proportion dropped to 10.9 per cent.⁷ Employers increasingly turned to private recruitment, sending back trustworthy foremen and employees to China to recruit fellow villagers and kinsmen as "free labourers," who were obliged to be loyal to their employers. This "freeing" of labour accelerated in the wake of the 1914 ban on Chinese-indentured-labour imports and the passing of industry control to western capital and technology.⁸

Therefore, by the First World War, Chinese workers were "freer" than before and relatively "free" to choose their employers and place of work. Chinese-labour dominance in mining is illustrated in Figure 1. Chinese comprised 96.2 per cent of people employed in mining in 1911, whereas Indians made up 2.4 per cent and Malays 1.3 per cent. As shown in Figure 1, Indian and Malay participation in mining was small compared to Chinese participation every year between 1911 and 1965. The proportion of Chinese employed declined slowly, but remained highest: 85.1 per cent between 1931 and 1935, 68.5 per cent between 1946 and 1950 and 60.9 per cent between 1961 and 1965. The highest Indian participation in mining occurred between 1946 and 1950 when it was 14.7

7. Yip Yat Hoong, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969) p. 70, Table 1.5.

8. On tin mining see Wong Lin Ken, *The Malayan Tin Industry to 1914* (Tucson: Association for Asian Studies, 1965).

per cent, after rising dramatically in 1931 to 1935 to 9.8 per cent from 2.4 per cent in 1911. It then remained at about 12 per cent. The most significant trend was the increase in Malay



participation. From 1931 to 1935 it was 4.3 per cent, compared to only 1.3 per cent in 1911. Between the periods 1946 to 1950 and 1961 to 1965 Malay participation in mining increased dramatically from 14.8 per cent to 26.2 per cent. Thus an analysis of employment

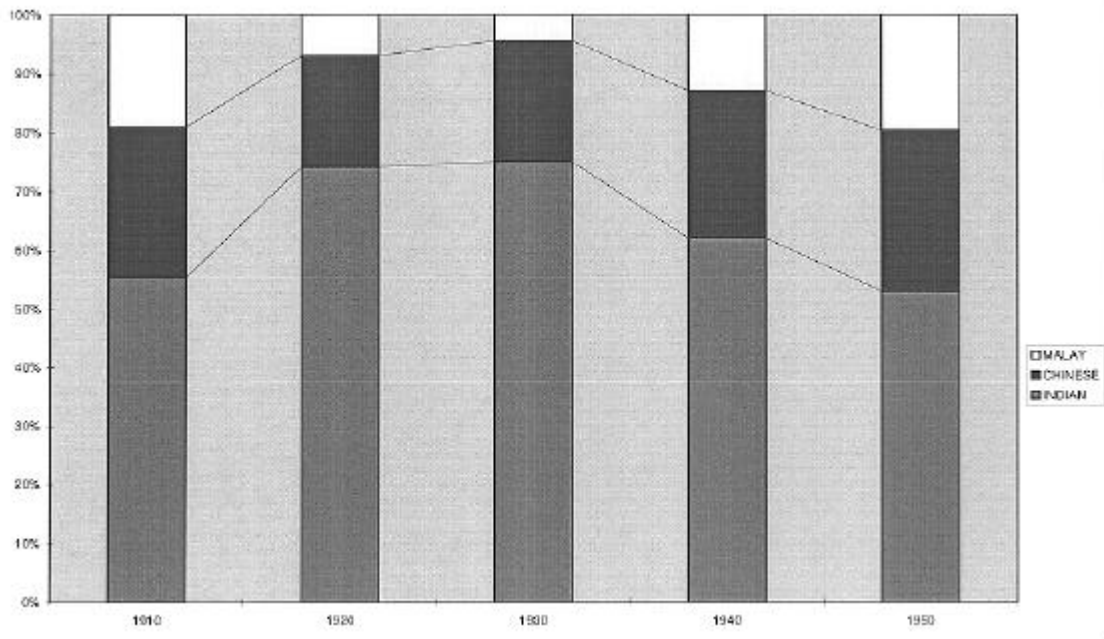
Figure 1. Employment in Tin Mining in Malaya by Race, 1911-1965 (annual average) in %

Source: Compiled from Yip Yat Hoong, *The Development of the Tin Mining Industry of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969), p. 384.

patterns in Malaysian tin mining reveals the significant participation of Chinese and the increasing share of Indian and Malay employment in this sector associated with declining employment.

The rapid expansion of rubber production in Malaysia was a direct consequence of rising world demand associated with automobile-industry growth, strong encouragement by the state with attractive land-alienation and other policies, the provision of infrastructure and, above all, the availability of low-wage labour. Plantations were in remote, lightly populated regions and they relied on immigrant labour. The immigrants were predominantly from Southern India and most were hired under the indenture system.

Southern Indians were preferred for a variety of reasons. Chinese workers could only be hired through contractors and were relatively “expensive”. Southern Indians (Tamils) were cheap and easy to recruit because India had the same imperial government. Southern India’s proximity to Malaya was an equal consideration. Tamil labour was preferred because it was also considered docile and suited to the dependent relationship between management and employee. The main motive of European plantation owners was to maintain the greatest



control possible over the work force.⁹ However, the Indians could not afford to migrate spontaneously and there were more attractive opportunities in other British colonies, offering higher wages, better living conditions and a greater chance of them landing as free men.

In the second half of the nineteenth century indentured labour was the norm, but by the turn of the century an increased demand for labour led to Southern Indians being recruited

Figure 2. *Employment on Rubber Plantations in Malaya by Race, 1910-1950 (%)*

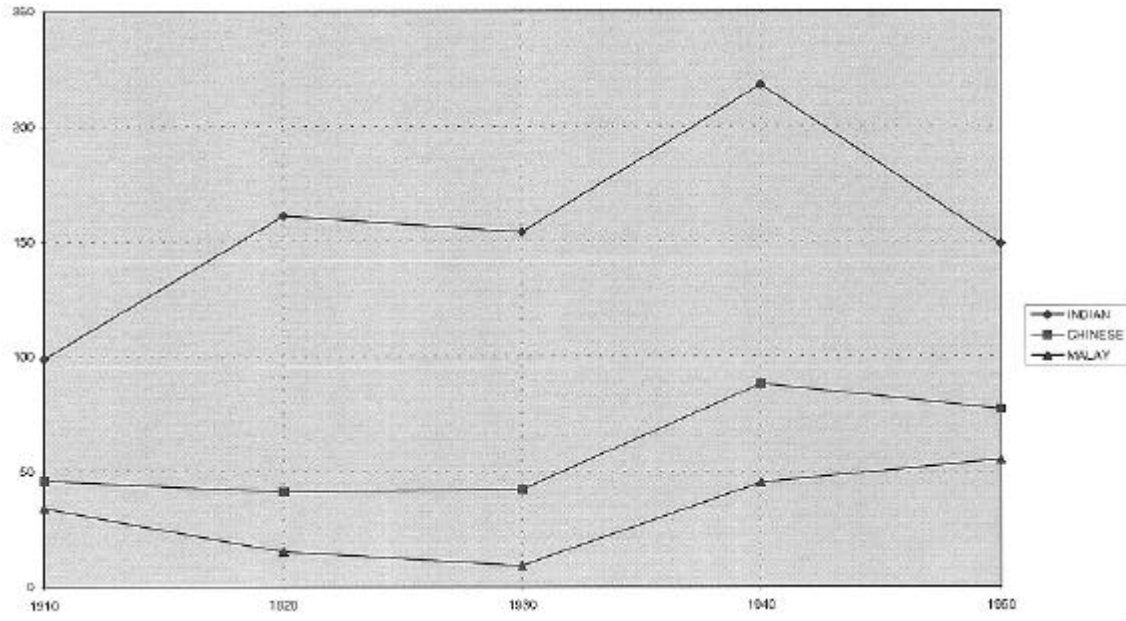
Source: C. Barlow, in: P.J. Rimmer, L.M. Allen (eds), *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 26.

either as “assisted” or “unassisted” labour. Two types of recruitment system were categorised as assisted labour: indenture and *kangani*. Under the indenture recruitment system, an employer seeking workers would turn to a labour-recruitment firm in Negapatnam or Madras or it would send agents to Southern India to recruit labourers directly. The agents lent money to people wanting to migrate to Malaya on condition that the intending migrants entered a contract to work for a fixed period, varying from three to five years. When the period of indenture expired they could be indentured again or released, provided they had paid off the expense of their recruitment. Indentured Indian labour was banned in 1910 and a parallel system of labour recruitment, the *kangani* system, was used to import Indian labour.

This system, essentially one of personal recruitment, was favoured by the colonial government, which after 1907 financed recruitment through a government-sponsored fund

9. See Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery. The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

which took contributions from all plantations. A breakdown of Indian immigrant labour by



recruitment shows that by 1941, 1,910,820 immigrants had been assisted while 811,598 had come to Malaya unassisted.¹⁰ Thus Indians were the chief source of plantation labour. Both recruitment systems restricted labour mobility. Under the indenture system, immigrants could not work for another employer while indentured. Under the *kangani* system, the Labour Code of 1912 in theory gave labourers the right to give a month's notice to employers before leaving estates for other employment provided they settled their debts with employers. This meant the *kangani* system kept labourers dependent and in employers' clutches. One Indian scholar asserts that the *kangani* system was a "variant of

Figure 3. Malaya: Dynamics of Employment on Rubber Plantations by Race, 1910-1950 (thousands)

Source: C. Barlow, in: P.J. Rimmer, L.M. Allen (eds), *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 26.

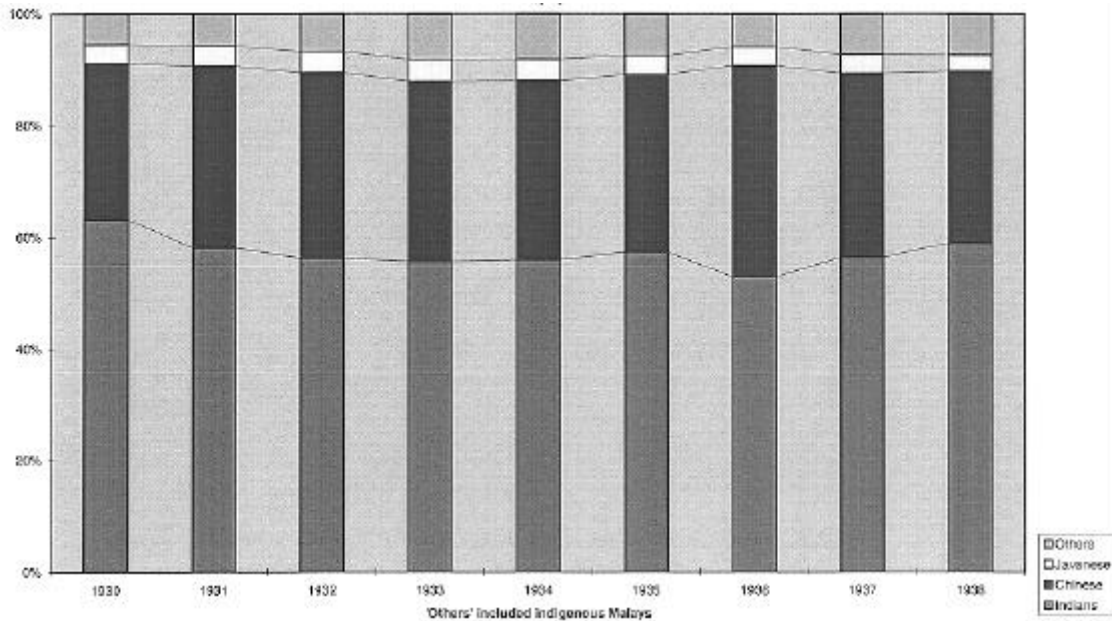
the indenture system, as in effect, the debt-bondage relationship between servant and master still remained, although indirectly".¹¹ Plantations' remoteness and the paternalistic society they engendered also discouraged mobility. Consequently, there was no real free market for Indian labour in this period. A smaller proportion of labourers in Malaya were Javanese. They worked under contract despite such an arrangement being banned for Indians and

10. Selvakumaran Ramachandran, *Indian Plantation Labour in Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed & Co. for INSAN, 1994) p. 65.

11. P. Arudsothy, "The Labour Force in a Dual Economy" (PhD thesis, Glasgow University, 1968) p. 75.

Chinese.

The high proportion of Indian labour in the plantation sector is shown in Figure 2. Their



participation rate on rubber plantations was 55 per cent in 1910. This rate grew significantly to 74 per cent in 1920 and 75 per cent in 1930. Indian labour participation then declined, but remained more than 60 per cent in 1940 and 53 per cent in 1950 (Figure 3). Chinese comprised 25.7 per cent of workers in 1910 while Malays comprised 19 per cent. In 1920 and 1930 Chinese made up only 20 per cent of workers while Malays made up only 7 per cent. In 1930, Malay representation in rubber-plantation labour fell most significantly to about 4 per cent (Figure 2). Between 1940 and 1950, the proportion Malay workers increased from 12.8 per cent to 19.6 per cent while Chinese representation increased from 25 per cent to 27 per cent. Nevertheless, it must be noted that rubber smallholders were primarily Malay and Chinese. They used family labour and practised share cropping.

The expanding colonial economy encouraged a variety of occupations in urban areas. These occupations were mainly confined to processing industries for exports, public works

Figure 4. Labourers Employed on Estates, Mines, Factories and Government Departments in Malaya, 1930-1938 (%)

Source: C. Barlow, in: P.J. Rimmer, L.M. Allen (eds), *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 13.

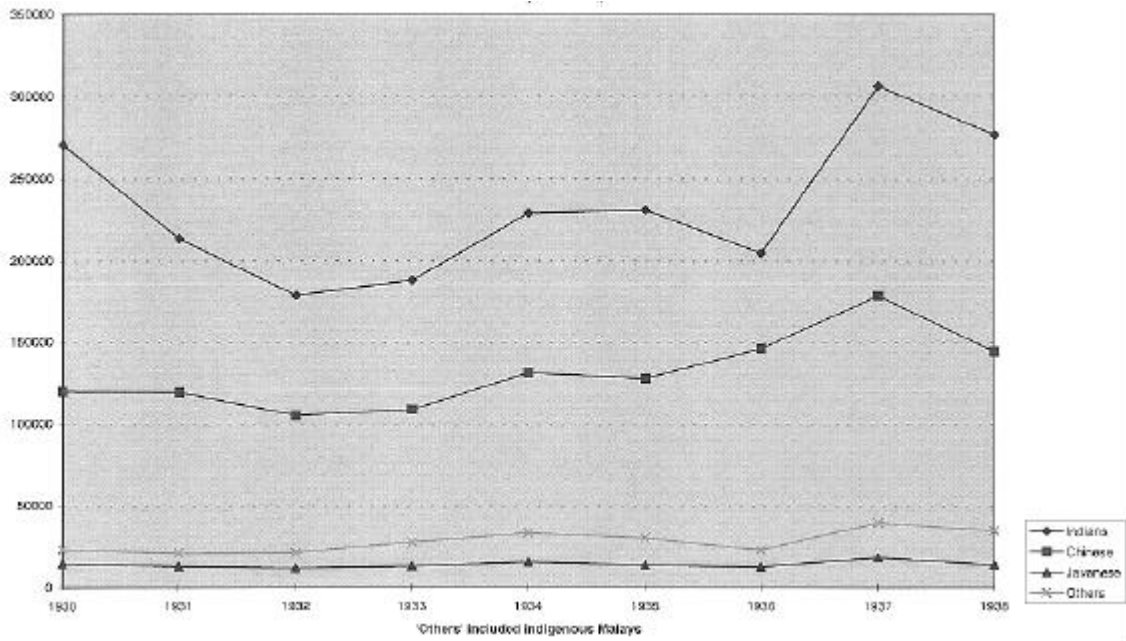
(road, rail, harbour and engineering departments)¹² and the bureaucracy. This urban labour

12. See, for example, Amarjit Kaur, "Working on the Railway: Indian Workers in Malaya, 1880-1957," in P.J. Rimmer and Lisa M. Allen (eds), *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1995): 99-128

force was principally male and immigrant. It was divided into categories according to skill, occupation, ethnicity and gender.

Employment by sector in Malaya in the 1930s is provided in Figure 4, which shows a clear ethnic division of labour by 1940. More Indians were employed in all sectors than any other ethnic group. Indians comprised more than 60 per cent of the wage labour force in 1930 and 59 per cent in 1938. The second largest group of paid workers were the Chinese. Chinese comprised 28 per cent of workers in 1930 and 31 per cent in 1938. The number of Javanese and others (a category which included indigenous Malays) remained low before 1940. "Others" accounted for 5 per cent of labour in 1930 and 7 per cent in 1938 while Javanese comprised about 3 per cent during the period in question (Figures 4 and 5). These employment figures are interesting for two reasons. First, they show the high level of wage employment among Indians. Second, Indian labour included women so the largest group of paid female workers in Malaya before the Second World War was Indian. This is evident in Figures 6 and 7 which show the population by size, race and gender between 1911 and 1957. In summary, most wage workers in Malaya were Chinese or Indian. Few were Javanese or others.

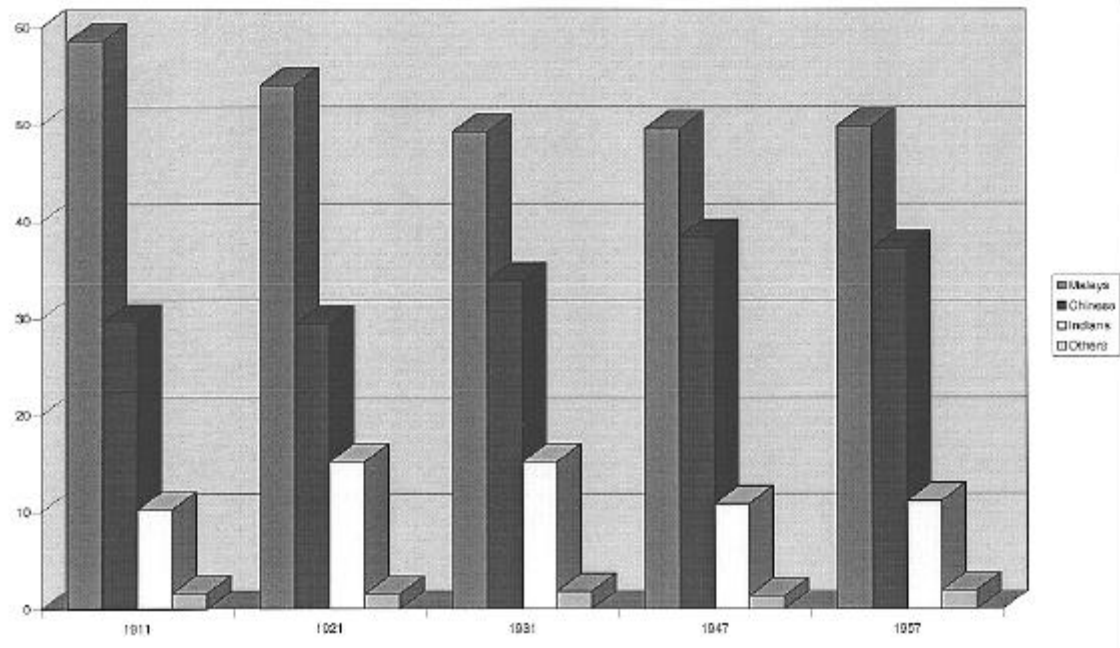
Figure 5. Dynamics of Labourers Employed in Malaya, 1930-1938 (numbers)



Source: C. Barlow, in: P.J. Rimmer, L.M. Allen (eds), *The Underside of Malaysian History* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 13.

With this ethnic division of labour, Malays were encouraged to specialise in rice cultivation since the British feared that speculation in land by Malays, because of the rubber boom, would help create a class of land-less Malay wage labourers. Although Malays were seen as an alternative labour supply, the introduction of the Malay Land Reservation Enactment (1913), The Rice Lands Enactment (1917) and other legislation kept most Malays in rural areas with subsistence production. Nevertheless, they were not shielded from the impact of commercial forces outside rural areas. Increased governance and rising taxation caused not only an increasingly large proportion of peasant rice to be sold but also the entry (despite official colonial policy) of Malays into rubber production as smallholders and wage labourers. This led to changes in economic relations between male and female Malays as they moved from subsistence production to commercial production, which entailed contracted wage labour. The labouring part of the population was now controlled by capitalists who owned their labour power. Moreover, the product of their labour was no longer accrued by them but by capitalists. As more and more Malays were unable to produce the things necessary for their changing needs, they were forced to sell the only thing they owned – their labour power. While it became necessary for some family members to sell their labour, it was also essential that certain things with only use value continued to be produced. These things related to the reproduction of labour, bearing and rearing of children, and home maintenance. Consequently, women became primarily responsible for producing these use values and men became chiefly responsible for selling their labour to capitalists. The labour process in Malay society was thus split into two spheres: commodity production done mainly by men and domestic labour done by women (the Indians and Chinese had already experienced a similar transformation in their own

Figure 6. Malaya: Percentage Distribution of Population by Race, 1911-1957



Source: Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1988).

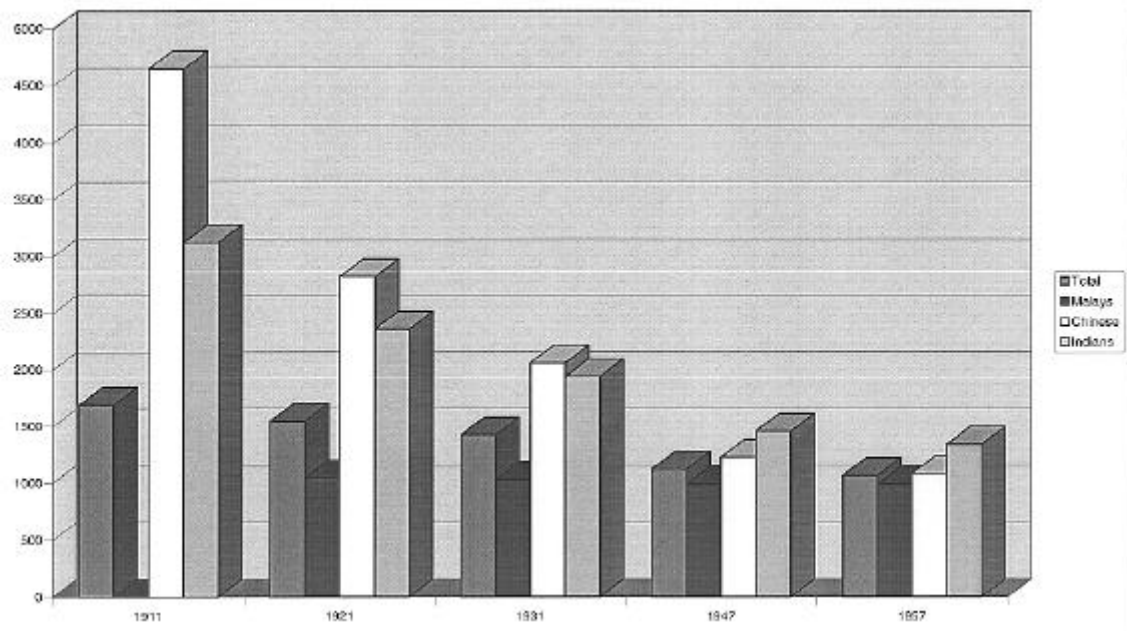


Figure 7. Malaya: Sex-Ratio by Race, 1911-1957 (males per thousand females)

Source: Saw Swee-Hock, *The Population of Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press,

1988).

countries). With this separation of labour under capitalism, male and female labour was no longer defined the same way. Essentially, women were defined out of the capitalist labour market.

Additionally, state policy to increase the production and trade of rice led to more credit, fertiliser and mechanisation in this sector, and these were all directed at men who were perceived as the “legitimate” occupiers of “productive” roles. In the 1950s too, as part of a drive to raise rural incomes, training centres were established to acquaint men with better methods of husbandry and usage of chemical fertilisers in rice and rubber production. Women were either totally ignored or displaced from their “traditional” activities. Thus the status of women’s work was reduced and this set the stage for later developments in the country, which have determined the contemporary structure of female labour participation.

Therefore women’s work - the bearing and rearing of children - and home management were relegated to the background without monetary value. This was accompanied by a decline in women’s active participation in the market economy. When women (normally Chinese and Indian) did participate in wage labour, they received jobs which were seen as being lower-order. For example, women were typically “weeders” in the rubber industry doing the same work as male “tappers”¹³ for less pay.

By the end of the colonial period, Malay women were largely displaced from the “productive” sector. Women were employed less in mining¹⁴ because of increasing mechanisation, industry decline with the depletion of mines and the Employment Act of 1955, which prohibited the employment of women in underground work. In the rubber sector, Indian women were the first to go in the Great Depression (Interestingly, during Japanese occupation, women took over as tappers.) By 1940 women in Malaysia had become an institutionalised inactive reserve army of labour.

During the colonial period, labour policy resulted in two prevailing patterns of labour utilisation. The first was an ethnic division of labour maintained by political and economic instruments, which caused labour differentiation according to race and occupation. The second was a gender division of labour which, as a labour policy, has shaped the country’s economic and social structures, conditioned women’s economic role and displaced women from mainstream of development. The ethnic division of labour was manifested in the identification of race with occupations primarily associated with capitalist economic relations. This was coterminous with the gender division of labour, whereby a wage differential was created in the economy’s modern sectors with lower pay rates for work performed by women. Hence many tasks became almost exclusively performed by women and work became a bearer of gender. Women’s employment was less secure and it was

13. See, for example, Amarjit Kaur, “Tappers and Weeders: South Indian Plantation Labour in Peninsular Malaysia, 1880-1970”, *South Asia*, Special Volume, *Across the Kala Pani: Indian overseas migration and Settlementt* Vol. XXI (1998): 73-102

14. See, for example, Amarjit Kaur, “Hewers and Haulers: A History of Coal Miners and Coal Mining in Malaya”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 24, 1 (1990) p. 81.

contingent upon economic conditions since women constituted a reserve source of labour.

In keeping with western culture, men were seen as the “legitimate” occupiers of formal public roles while women were their attachments. Colonial land regulations also ensured that patriarchal control of households grew and new opportunities in agricultural modernisation programmes were directed at men. Therefore an unequal pay structure was established according to the notion that men’s wages must support a family while wage-earning women are partly supported by men or at least have only themselves to support.¹⁵

The increased labour market participation of women after independence can be attributed to three main factors. First, the pattern of migration shifted, with changes in national government policy playing a key role. As noted previously, prior to WWII, the colonial government imposed almost no controls on migration. This had allowed the large scale movement of migrants from China, India, and the Netherlands East Indies to Malaya. After 1957 the Malayan government imposed restrictions on immigration and the movement of foreign labour into Malaya was curtailed. In the then expanding economy as a range of jobs became available, they provided opportunities for women. Second, the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970 also resulted in rapid changes in many aspects of Malaysian society. The NEP was designed to eliminate the identification of race with occupation, and the state’s diversification/industrialisation strategies subsequently facilitated the flow of Malay women into the modern sectors of the economy. This was concomitant with a policy of positive discrimination for Malays in the spheres of education, employment, and access to credit. Secondary and tertiary education became readily available for Malays from both rural and urban areas. Moreover, the educational policy provided both boys and girls with equal access to education, resulting in a rising level of educational attainment among Malay girls in particular.⁵ This was reflected in increased labour market participation among Malay women so that by the 1980s there was little difference between Malay and Chinese women’s labour market participation rate in the urban areas. Additionally, the share of Malay women’s participation in the manufacturing sector also rose. Thus the state education policy facilitated Malay (and other women’s) movement into the paid work force.

Third, the marked increase in women’s share in manufacturing employment in both absolute and relative terms was associated with export-oriented industrialisation and the new international division of labour, where Malaysia has a competitive edge in manufacturing due to its comparative advantage of cheap labour. The recruitment of women followed economic rationality rather than being based on women’s essential traditional skills, and women’s unique role in manufacturing is a key variable in the success of the Malaysian government’s development effort.

5. The New International Division of Labour and the Feminisation of Labour

The post-World-War-II era of global relationships, associated with the internationalisation of nearly all economies, saw the emergence of a new international division of labour with the redistribution of manufacturing and service industries. This new division has involved

15. Cf. Patricia Connelly, *Last Hired, First Fired* (Toronto: The Women’s Press, 1978) pp. 26-32.

a dramatic shift of production from Europe and North America to the developing economies of Asia and Latin America. The end of the Cold War also resulted in power transfers and the rise of Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, which now compete against the United States and Europe in the corporate colonisation of Southeast Asia. This new division is linked to technological advances which have enabled fragmentation of production, moving labour-intensive production to cheap-wage areas while specialist management, research and development has stayed in developed countries.

Industrialisation in Peninsular Malaysia started with the pioneer industries programme, in 1958, to encourage import-substitution industrialisation. Most manufacturing involved primary products (tin, timber, rubber) and consumer goods (for example, vegetable oil, soap). In 1959 these industries accounted for 53 per cent of the labour force, which was mostly male. This phase of import-substitution manufacturing lasted until the 1970s. The relatively small domestic market was exploited fairly quickly and from 1968 the government offered incentives to encourage production for export markets. A major influence on industrial growth was exerted by export-processing zones, known as Free Trade Zones, which the Malaysian government set up in the early 1970s, following the example set by Taiwan and South Korea. The Free Trade Zones were designed, principally, to attract foreigners to invest in export production with a package of incentives which included the duty-free import of raw materials and capital equipment, company tax concessions, simplified customs procedures and the provision of infrastructure. Foreign investors were also attracted by the ready availability cheap labour and government restrictions on the formation of in-house trade unions. The leading industries were textiles, electronics goods, transportation equipment and scientific and optical instruments.

Between 1970 and 1988 Malaysia's labour force increased from just over 4 million to nearly 6.1 million,¹⁶ an average annual growth rate of 2.33 per cent, heralding two major changes. First, agriculture declined in relative and absolute terms, while manufacturing and services increased. In the late 1980s manufacturing assumed prime importance, accounting for over 50 per cent of export earnings (See Appendix 1). By 1993 manufacturing had increased to make up 71 per cent of Malaysia's exports and 30 per cent of GDP. Second, there was a sharp rise in the proportion of women in work. From 1957 to 1980, women's participation rates rose from 29.9 per cent to 39.3 per cent while men's fell from 87.3 to 81.8 per cent. In the 1970s, the number of women in manufacturing, trade and services grew by 16.6 per cent, 14.5 per cent and 9.6 per cent a year respectively. This trend continued in the 1980s with the growth index for women's employment (1980=100) reaching 125.3 in 1986 against 117.8 for men.¹⁷ (See Appendix 2).

What are some of the implications of this labour utilisation pattern? First, women are concentrated in the industrial and service sectors of the economy. Just over 95 per cent of new jobs created in manufacturing between 1980 and 1986/7 were taken up by women. The

16. K.S. Jomo, *Growth and Structural Change in the Malaysian Economy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990) Table 4.1, p. 79.

17. Lim Lin Lean, "The Feminization of Labour in the Asia-Pacific Rim Countries: From Contributing to Economic Dynamism to Bearing the Brunt of Structural Adjustments", in Naohiro Ogawa, G.W. Jones and J.G. Williamson (eds), *Human Resources in Development along the Asia-Pacific Rim* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993) Tables 6.2-6.3, pp. 177-181.

availability of this supply of female labour, principally Malay, has been assured by a continuing reduction in farm sizes, increased vagrancy and lower demand for female farm labour resulting from the Green Revolution in agriculture. Second, this work force is mostly made up of young, predominantly single women from poor, lower-class backgrounds. In rural areas they come from land-less or near land-less peasant families. The women have some education, since employers believe that education helps them adapt to the discipline required for production work. Women are also concentrated in electronics and textile industries, which are “eminently suitable for the docile, patient, easily intimidated and manipulated” woman.¹⁸ Third, factory work and organisation replicates the patriarchal structure of society. The women are supervised by male managers; discipline is strictly enforced; and men’s “control” of women is but a redefinition of gender roles accompanying the transformation of capitalist relations of production. Factory work is also characterised by short contracts and insecurity of tenure (the women work on fixed contracts or on a sub-contractual basis, for example in the garment industry). When they reach a certain age, they are often dismissed so employers can avoid paying “seniority” wages. They are also most vulnerable to retrenchment and unemployment during economic downturn. For example, between 1983 and 1985 more than half the workers retrenched in manufacturing were women, principally from electronics and textile industries.¹⁹

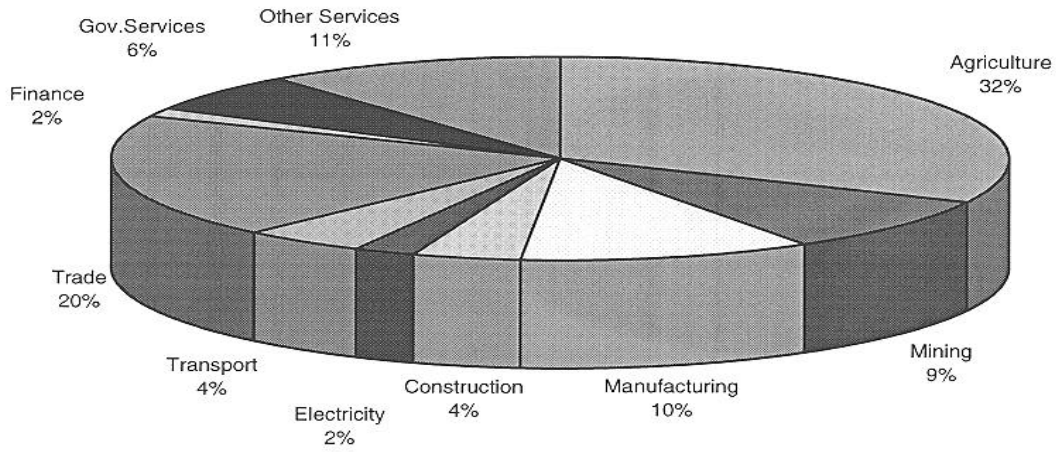
6. Conclusion

In summary, while the identification of race with occupation has been largely eroded by the nation state’s use of political and economic instruments, the gender division of labour is very much alive in Malaysia. While female labour participation facilitated rapid economic growth, Malaysian women, especially in industrial work, face many sources of discrimination. The channelling of women into the unskilled and semi-skilled sectors of the work force and few training opportunities, made available to them by employers or the state, maintain their position as a secondary work force. The new gender division of labour associated with capitalist economic relations has not replicated the diverse range of economic activities that women have traditionally undertaken. Rather, women have been relegated to the position of Malaysia’s cheapest and most abundant resource available to international foreign capital.

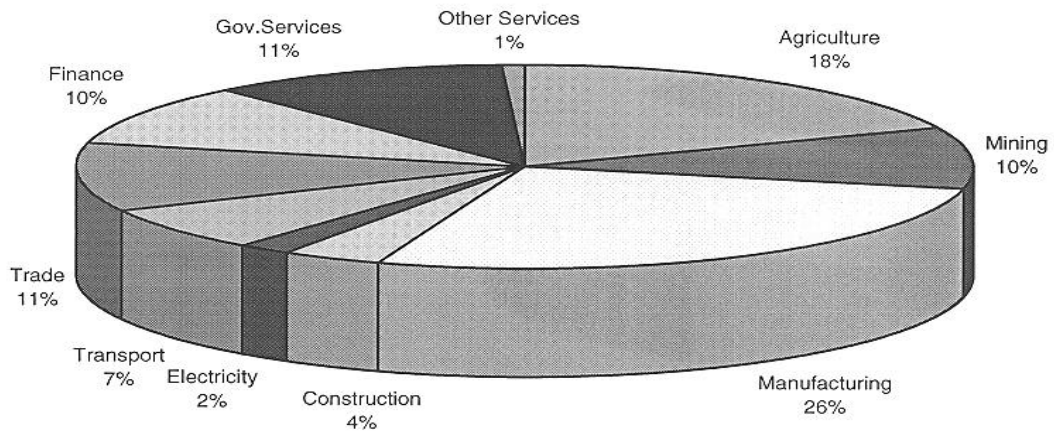
18. L. Lim and Pang Eng Fong, “The Southeast Asian Economies: Resilient Growth and Expanding Linkages”, *Southeast Asian Affairs 1994* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1994) p. 24.

19. Lim Lin Lean, “The Feminization of Labour”, Tables 6.2-6.3, p. 184. See also Jamilah Ariffin *et al.*, “Women in the Labour Market in Malaysia,” in Susan Horton (ed.), *Women and Industrialisation in Asia* (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 207-243.

Appendix 1. Percentage Share of Gross Domestic Product by Industry of Origin in Malaysia, 1970-1990



1990



Source: *Fifth Malaysian Plan, 1986-1990* (Kuala Lumpur, 1986), pp. 172-175.

Appendix 2. Female/Male Participation Rates by Selected Sectors, 1970-1990

Source: Compiled from K.S. Jomo and P. Todd, *trade Unions and the State in Peninsular Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 31.

