

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Exploring driving factors and challenges faced by women in trade union membership

Fadillah Ismail<sup>1,\*</sup>, Rabeatul Husna Abdull Rahman<sup>2</sup>, Chan Shiau Wei<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Technology Management and Business, Universiti Tun Hussien Onn Malaysia, Batu Pahat 86400, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor, Malaysia

\* Corresponding author: Fadillah Ismail, fadillah@uthm.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

This study places gender at the center of concepts used to investigate union membership and involvement in the Malaysian context, indicating that a gender-sensitive methodology contributes to the knowledge. To gain a better understanding of the topic of women's involvement in trade unions in Malaysia, the researchers conducted a literature review of previous articles to support the study's objectives, which were to determine the factors that motivate women's participation in trade unions and the challenges that they face as members of a trade union. This issue's problem statement is connected to women's empowerment, which is a prerequisite for a just, sustainable, and rights-based economy. Nonetheless, women in Malaysia continue to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. This study elaborated 5 factors that influence women's union joining and participation, such as promoting gender equality in the workplace, feminism movement motivation, union experiences, better working conditions, and experiences in ensuring job assurance and welfare. Besides that, challenges those women face while being members of a union in Malaysia are unevenness and under-representation, gender discrimination against female unionists, discouragement or hostility in a sexual harassment case, and the prominence of a male-dominated network in the quest for leadership positions. Additionally, this study made several recommendations on how women can be empowered so that their participation and involvement in trade union can bring value and justice to the current dynamic workforce.

**Keywords:** trade union; women; membership; involvement; challenges; factors

## ARTICLE INFO

Received: 10 October 2023

Accepted: 8 May 2024

Available online: 12 August 2024

## COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2024 by author(s).

Journal of Autonomous Intelligence is published by Frontier Scientific Publishing.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

## 1. Introduction

According to Arumugam and Livan<sup>[1]</sup>, there has been a lack of representation of women in the leadership of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) which incites concern as leadership roles have always been the exclusive domain of men. They cited that the impact of this concern is very serious, especially for women's representation regarding women's equality in Malaysia. The failure to uphold women workers' rights is a failure to uphold the labour rights of all workers. But despite these barriers, those working women were determined to make their mark and fight for their rights in the workplace<sup>[2]</sup>. And they made great progress, often without the support of the more established labour unions. Do not underestimate the role of women in the labour movement. Though they haven't always received the recognition they deserve, women have been a powerful force in organised labour from the start. Women have engaged in strikes and other organised forms of labour protest, complained about workplace injustices, and participated in a variety of labour movement activities such as Labour Day celebrations and public

meetings on labour policy. However, these protests and events are rarely reported. Despite their record of public action, women’s activism has been overshadowed by the focus on male workers’ issues and the paucity of women in leadership roles.

According to data supplied by the Department of Trade Union Affairs of Malaysia, female membership in a Trade Union (TU) has steadily climbed over the last five years, rising from 47.48% in 2017 to 49.92% in 2021, in contrast to male membership, which has been dropping as shown in **Table 1** below. The increase in women’s membership in TU provides meaningful insight for the researcher to investigate the underlying factors affecting and motivating their involvement in TU over the past 5 years from the Malaysian perspective particularly. Besides that, the membership trends for both genders, male and female show that the number of TU in Malaysia has been steadily increasing from 742 TU in 2017 to 770 TU by the year 2020.

**Table 1.** Membership of Trade Unions by gender (2017–2021)<sup>[3]</sup>.

Year	Number of Trade Union	Membership				Total
		Male	Percentage	Female	Percentage	
2017	742	487,992	(52.52%)	441,240	(47.48%)	929,232
2018	751	489,628	(52.61%)	441,106	(47.39%)	930,734
2019	762	479,292	(50.52%)	469,480	(49.48%)	948,772
2020	770	486,053	(50.81%)	470,489	(49.19%)	956,542
2021	747	471,250	(50.08%)	469,664	(49.92%)	940,914

However, data shows that there is a significant drop in the number of TU in the year 2021, which is believed to be influenced by the global pandemic crisis, COVID-19, that has tremendously affected businesses and even organisations across the global scale and not only in Malaysia. This statement is supported by Otieno, Wandeda and Mwamadzingo<sup>[3]</sup> who cited that a decline in the number of trade unions during COVID-19 is highly influenced by the reduction and restrictive measures put in place by governments to curb the virus during the time of pandemic crisis.

Women make up about half of Malaysia’s working-age population, yet they account for barely two-fifths of the labour force. Malaysia had a GGG index of 0.68 in the 2021 Global Gender Gap (GGG) report issued by the World Economic Forum (WEF), unchanged from the previous four years (2018–2021), as indicated in **Table 2** below. In actuality, because of the economic turmoil created by COVID-19, Malaysia has been ranked 103 on the WEF GGG Index 2022, trailing behind Singapore (49), Thailand (79), and Indonesia (92) in a nation where the gender gap has not improved<sup>[4]</sup>. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the instability and inequality in the labour market which has already worsened. Looking into our closest neighbouring country which is Singapore, in the latest World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2021, Singapore is ranked 54th out of 156 countries with a score of 0.727. The score value can be understood as 0 being total inequality while 1 being equality where the closer the score value towards 1, the more gender equality in the country is perceived by their citizens. The good representation of Singapore in promoting gender equality was supported by the United Nations Human Development Report 2019 that ranked Singapore 11th out of 162 countries for gender equality, beating the US, Canada, and Spain, which is something that Malaysia can learn from our neighbouring country<sup>[5]</sup>.

**Table 2.** Malaysia’s global gender gap index score (Source: World Economic Forum<sup>[6]</sup>).

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Global gender gap index score	0.67	0.68	0.68	0.68	0.68

Empowering women is a prerequisite for a just, sustainable, and rights-based economy. Nonetheless,

women continue to bear a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. Furthermore, gender discrimination is to blame for women’s over-representation in insecure, low-wage occupations. At the same time, top decision-making roles continue to be dominated by males, even in industries where women outnumber men. In such circumstances, trade unions play a critical role in challenging gender stereotypes in the workplace and promoting sexual equality<sup>[7]</sup>. Many of them do so by incorporating a gender lens into their work, and their efforts actively contribute to the achievement of true equality. Trade union initiatives are concentrating on elevating women to leadership roles and improving the results for women in terms of equal pay for equal labour, non-discrimination in employment, work-life balance, and preventing and resolving workplace violence and harassment. Historically, trade unions were a fellowship of men in large-scale businesses. While things are changing, males continue to outweigh women in membership and leadership roles. In terms of female membership, the number of unionised women has grown during the previous 5 years.

Increased female engagement in trade union membership and leadership, on the other hand, does not result in actual gender equality gains. Gender equality is a more difficult process that requires a gradual transformation in a range of organisations and areas of participation. Regardless, given the growing number of women enrolling in TU, the purpose of this study was to identify and explore the variables that impact their decision to participate in TU, and also to unleash the challenges that they face while being a member of a TU.

### Trends of TU membership by sectors in Malaysia

To better understand TU membership patterns in Malaysia, data from the Malaysian Department of Trade Union Affairs is used, as seen in **Table 3** below. The statistics in the table may be further understood by looking at TU membership from a gender viewpoint in three (3) separate sectors: government, private, and statutory body TU membership. According to the statistics, female TU membership in the governmental and statutory body sectors has grown over the last five years (2017–2021), whereas female TU participation in the private sector has decreased.

**Table 3.** Trade Unions membership by sectors & gender 2017–2021.

Year	Government		Total	Private		Total	Statutory body		Total
	Male	Female		Male	Female		Male	Female	
2017	191,041	298,907	489,948	252,855	116,813	369,668	44,096	25,520	69,616
2018	173,507	297,657	471,164	271,943	117,942	389,885	44,178	25,507	69,685
2019	173,468	326,423	499,891	255,756	110,661	366,417	50,068	32,396	82,464
2020	174,600	326,432	501,032	259,315	112,197	371,512	52,138	31,860	83,998
2021	173,880	331,984	505,864	250,670	108,603	359,273	46,700	29,077	75,777

In contrast to female membership, the male membership has declined both in government and private TU membership, while there has been a fluctuation in figure patterns and trends in the statutory body sector. The data supplied helps us to have a better understanding of how TU was seen by both genders and how we could foresee TU’s relevance in defending workers’ rights and giving them a voice in the workplace. TU is essential in today’s workforce, particularly in building a feeling of responsibility among employees while maintaining acceptable remuneration and workplace circumstances for employees, since its objective is to boost the productivity and morale of employees.

## 2. Discussion

The researchers emphasised the important variables that inspire women’s participation in Trade Unions (TU) and the problems that women who join these trade unions encounter in the following sections.

## 2.1. Factors that influence women's participation in trade union

Factor 1: To promote gender equality in the workplace:

The concept of fostering gender parity, or commonly known as gender equality at the workplace, is one of the variables that affect women's engagement and participation in trade unions<sup>[2]</sup>. In a world dominated by males in high-ranking positions, women are often looked down on, subjected to discrimination, and treated unfairly because of gender stereotypes. Gender equality in Malaysian workplaces leaves much to be desired, especially among women. According to a remark made by a Malaysian member of parliament, equal labour, equal pay, flexible hours, and a more compassionate workplace for women are among the topics that Malaysia should focus on. Looking at the 12th Malaysia Plan, which emphasises the country's dedication to achieving gender equality, which corresponds with the fifth result of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, which is to achieve gender equality by 2030, as well as the Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 which dedicates the common goal and aspirations. TU are frequently associated with their efforts to make the voice of workers heard by the authorities so that reforms that benefit all parties concerned may be achieved, which has become one of the drivers toward women's participation in the TU<sup>[7]</sup>. Therefore, the role of TU in bringing women's voices heard, especially regarding the problems and issues faced by this gender, surely becomes one of the motivating factors for women to join the TU organization. Besides, the ideology of bringing gender equality into the table where male domination widely becomes the current stereotype in the current workforce can provide a path and platform to ensure women's rights, and voices are heard by the authorities so that legal and promising rights are able to be adhered to in the current workforce.

Factor 2: Feminism movement motivation:

The feminist notion, which expresses the preservation of women's issues based on gender equality, also drives women's participation in TU<sup>[8]</sup>. Women make up about half of Malaysia's population, and their contributions to the country's progress are evident and should be acknowledged and cannot be neglected. However, women's participation in the union movement is limited by the macho ethos of trade unions and male unionists, as well as the persistent focus on women's roles in the household<sup>[1]</sup>. Because of such a mindset, feminism has grown over the ground of fighting for equality in the workplace, and women's leaders have been vocal about it for many decades. As previously noted, trade union women may have pre-existing feminist ideas and ideals that influence their attitude to joining or participating<sup>[2]</sup>, or feminism may grow in the context of work and union experiences. Feminist women are more likely to pursue upward union careers or to push for a more feminist perspective when they rise in their jobs. This is evident in the current poll because most self-identified feminist women worked in unions. Other self-identified feminists believe that women should be able to organise independently to ensure that the union works for them.

Factor 3: Trust in union experiences and leadership:

According to Arissa et al.<sup>[9]</sup>, employees join unions out of a desire to be represented and their trust and belief that unions can improve their economy or well-being by being members. Actual union experiences are critical in explaining how individuals come to join and engage, and this has gendered implications given the male dominance of trade union structures. Sponsorship and encouragement had a considerably greater influence on participation than enrolling in any organisation or institution. Most women required this to move them from passive membership to active involvement. Because they worked in a heavily unionised environment where unionisation was the "natural" thing to do<sup>[2]</sup>. This setting of possibility to join, on the other hand, was not frequently viewed as allowing engagement. Participation was more dependent on the recent encouragement of a female office-holder. As a result, TU's capacity to instill trust in its workforce is founded on its expertise in resolving disputes between employers and employees while preserving the rights and voices of the latter.

Factor 4: Better working conditions and experiences:

According to Pacris and Geges<sup>[10]</sup>, the key reason for women joining trade unions, is to advocate for workers' rights that promote better working conditions and experiences as a working individual. Trade unions value women unionists highly because, even though they frequently perform non-leadership roles, they contribute significantly to the organization's success. This factor of promoting better working conditions and experiences has long been discussed, particularly when dealing with issues of workplace discrimination. It is believed that TU is capable of bringing the voice of those who were discriminated against to be heard and gaining authority as well as public awareness on the prevailing issues that occurred. Consider the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) march against HSBC Bank over discrimination charges and unresolved complaints. This bank-related problem has ignored peaceful industrial relations involving 300 trade disputes, such as meddling with and attempting to restrict NUBE's function and position as a trade union<sup>[11]</sup>. We can see from the concerns that the function of TU is crucial in shouting out workers' voices for any wrongdoing by employers that interferes with the workers' capacity to have a better working environment and experience while still upholding their human rights. TU has long been seen as one of the speakers of workers' voices, influencing individuals to register and participate as members while working for an organization, and this is true for all genders.

Factor 5: Job assurance, welfare, and rights:

Union members have indeed been able to achieve financial stability for themselves and their families via collective bargaining, including access to benefits that are within their means and the right to not be dismissed without justification, which is among the considerations of many who join TU when in a workforce. Additionally, having a union at work increases the likelihood that employees will voice safety concerns and be able to receive benefits, which is crucial in the context of COVID-19 so that job assurance, welfare, and rights are addressed well<sup>[3]</sup>. While unions are advantageous for all workers, women employees particularly need to be members. Women who belong to unions have a narrower wage gap than non-unionized women, in part because unions promote pay transparency, provide members with more control over access to salary information, and establish pay scales<sup>[7]</sup>. A culture of pay concealment that frequently makes it very challenging for individual employees to avoid or uncover inequities is disrupted by union pay transparency. The elimination of sexism in union structures and other social institutions should be a priority for unions. The Employment Act of 1955 (the EA), which establishes the fundamental rights of both employers and employees, is considered to be the most significant employment law in Malaysia. Because of the significance of this Act, Ministers have taken the initiative to make sure the EA is revised and in line with the requirements of the present job climate.

## **2.2. Challenges faced by women who join a trade union**

Challenge 1: Uneven and under-representation:

A significant challenge associated with the promotion of gender equality in the workplace for women participating in trade unions is the pervasive gender stereotypes and discrimination they face in male-dominated high-ranking positions. In environments where men hold dominant roles, women often encounter bias, discrimination, and unfair treatment based on these gender stereotypes. Despite Malaysia's commitment to achieving gender equality outlined in the 12th Malaysia Plan and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, the reality of gender equality in Malaysian workplaces, especially for women, falls short.

A member of the Malaysian parliament has highlighted key issues such as equal labor and pay, flexible hours, and creating a more compassionate workplace for women. The struggle for gender equality becomes a significant factor influencing women's engagement and participation in trade unions. Trade unions play a crucial role in amplifying the voices of workers, particularly women, in advocating for reforms that benefit all parties. The unions act as a driving force toward women's participation, providing a platform for women to address the challenges they face in the workplace.

The ideology of introducing gender equality into discussions challenges the prevailing stereotype of male domination in the current workforce. This not only serves as a path for ensuring women's rights but also establishes a platform for their voices to be heard by authorities, fostering legal and promising rights for women in the workforce. The associated challenge lies in dismantling deep-seated gender biases and fostering an inclusive work environment that recognizes and promotes the rights of women within trade unions and the broader workforce.

The issue of uneven representation is not new. Women are routinely prohibited from involvement in labour unions. Eventually, according to Malaysia's Department of Trade Union Affairs, 930,734 employees were registered as members of trade unions nationwide in 2018, with around 47.4% being women<sup>[12]</sup>. Even after being a part of the union, due to under-representation, women are not able to reflect in decision-making positions in the MTUC on women's equality in the country in severe conditions.

Even in many parts of the world, the same situation occurs for women like in our neighbouring country, Indonesia. Even though women workers make up 90% of the workforce in the Indonesian textile sector, according to the Better Work Indonesia Global Gender Strategy Report, there was minimal women's representation in the trade union<sup>[13]</sup>. The opportunity to give and discuss an opinion is there, but the limelight will be on the majority of those who were male in the union.

From here, their concerns were not prioritised to be taken action upon or even to exchange views about them. The majority rules, and males have historically dominated the labor movement<sup>[14]</sup>. Therefore, trade unions have not sufficiently represented women's interests. If they also had, there was a fair minimum point of them joining and working together in the trade union<sup>[15]</sup>.

#### Challenge 2: Gender discrimination against female unionists:

Despite having the same work performance as men, female workers and unionists face serious gender discrimination in the promotion process. According to the news that came out in late 2017, the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) president said, many complaints received by his office involved gender discrimination of female workers about hiring, salary increases, and promotions. Although there are companies that meet the 30 percent quota following government regulations and recommendations to support the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention, they do not meet the management promotion quota<sup>[16]</sup>.

The issues of gender parity and patriarchal norms were the issues female unionists facing gender discrimination encountered. Even where females are legally equal to males, male dominance is nevertheless assumed. When women questioned this truth, they were harshly discriminated against. Consider President of Kenya Moi's criticism of wealthy ladies for "confusing rural women by stating females should be treated the same as males." According to Ali et al.<sup>[17]</sup>, "To be equal with men is to indicate that God had erred after all when he created males the head of the family and placed women in the submissive role in families".

Further to that, Chung et al.<sup>[18]</sup>, also stated that this issue arises because some companies and unions in companies still perceive women's movement to be constrained, as well as family responsibilities and other factors that may impair future job performance, which is particularly looking into the maturity leave periods. In addition, female unionists were also exposed to other forms of discrimination such as sexual harassment and job segregation between genders as well<sup>[19]</sup>.

Women who join a trade union due to motivation from the feminist movement often encounter the challenge of gender discrimination within the union and workplace. Despite having similar work performance as their male counterparts, female workers and unionists face systemic gender discrimination, particularly in the promotion process. Reports from the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) in late 2017 highlighted numerous complaints about gender discrimination, covering hiring, salary increases, and promotions. While some companies comply with the 30 percent quota recommended by government regulations and the

International Labor Organization (ILO) convention, they often fall short in meeting the management promotion quota<sup>[16]</sup>.

The issues of gender parity and patriarchal norms exacerbate the challenges faced by female unionists, even when legal equality exists. The assumption of male dominance persists, leading to harsh discrimination when women challenge this norm. President Moi of Kenya criticized affluent women, asserting that females advocating for equal treatment were confusing rural women and challenging the traditional gender roles assigned by societal norms.

Furthermore, companies and unions sometimes perceive women's movement to be restricted due to family responsibilities and other factors that may be seen as impairing future job performance, particularly during maternity leave periods<sup>[18]</sup>. Female unionists may also confront additional forms of discrimination, including sexual harassment and job segregation based on gender<sup>[19]</sup>. Despite representing the women's community in the trade union to address these issues, minimal actions have been taken, perpetuating the challenges associated with gender discrimination for women motivated by the feminist movement. Efforts are needed to dismantle these discriminatory practices and foster an inclusive environment within trade unions.

### Challenge 3: Discouragement or hostility on sexual harassment case reports:

In addition to the minimal action taken on women's issues in trade unions, some issues were not reported due to discouragement to take over the problem and hostile reactions even when considering this type problem. The problem described in this content is like sexual harassment that has also been revealed in a poll conducted in 2020 among 1010 Malaysian female workers and found that 62% had undergone workplace sexual harassment<sup>[20]</sup>.

Sexual harassment was included in Part XVA of the Employment Act of 1955 in 2012. Section 2 presented a definition of sexual harassment. It was defined as any unwelcome sexual behaviour, whether verbal, nonverbal, visual, gestural, or physical, aimed towards an individual that is insulting or degrading or poses harm to his well-being that arises out of and in the course of his job. This is solely applicable to sexual harassment in the workplace only. But there were reported complaints of sexual harassment that are not rare in Malaysia, but many women believe that despite the availability of numerous legal channels, an effective remedy is still inadequate<sup>[21]</sup>. Therefore, this resulted from the discouragement of women who joined trade unions to even report it in the union due to a lack of justice.

Furthermore, it's challenging for women in trade unions to face their fear and hostility from the harasser during the investigation and trial in court even after the case verdict as well. This situation can be supported by this case published on Aljazeera news in mid of July 2022. A female worker who was sexually harassed by a male colleague in a conference room reported the situation to the manager and felt blamed. The inquiry revealed that the harasser was found to be not guilty due to no proper video evidence and that the witness of the incident also didn't stand by the victim's side.

After the verdict, she was joked about and blamed by the harasser that "she was the person who seduced him" and that the inquiry was biased since her harasser was close to the boss's brother. The hostile environment forced her to quit their job rather than pursue a lawsuit for constructive dismissal under the Industrial Relations Act 1967, which may have landed her monetary compensation. This scenario is also sustained by the statement that the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine<sup>[22]</sup> described severe or persistent sexual harassment in some types of organizations as producing hostile even frightening atmosphere, causing women to leave their employment and search for jobs somewhere else, otherwise discouraging women from considering applying for a job in the first place.

This additional information underscores the challenges women face within trade unions, particularly in dealing with issues such as sexual harassment, and emphasizes the need for a supportive and just environment

within trade unions to address these concerns effectively.

Challenge 4: The prominence of the male-dominated network in the quest for leadership positions:

As per research after research, there are few women in union leadership roles at all levels, particularly at the senior ranks, with few women engage in collective bargaining and the content of agreements remaining male-oriented<sup>[23]</sup>. Artus and Holland also detailed that social justice and equality are at the core of trade unionism, which upholds the rights of all employees, regardless of gender, to freedom of membership and transparency, among other things. Due to socio-cultural constraints, women have faced difficult hurdles and unequal treatment at work, resulting in fewer rights and freedoms and economic and psychological hardship<sup>[15]</sup>.

Moreover, the leadership of the MTUC has been the sole realm of men since its formation in 1949 as a body that operated as a mediator between the state and trade unions. The data shows that it is not for the lack of female unionists who are capable of filling these leadership roles<sup>[12]</sup>. According to Malaysia's Department of Trade Union Affairs, only 47.4% of women employees were registered as members of trade unions nationwide in 2018, while the rest were men. Further to that, two years later, in the 2020 MTUC leadership elections, few women employees were proposed for decision-making roles, let alone obtaining a seat at the table<sup>[12]</sup>. This situation led to the severe impact of women's not being represented in decision-making positions in the MTUC.

Moreover, women suffer from poor dominance in leadership positions in numerous ways, including monetarily, socially, and mentally. This results in a limited contribution to growth, gender equality, depression and demotivation of women at work, a lack of female role models, and so on<sup>[24]</sup>. In a study conducted by Chuchryk<sup>[25]</sup>, he indicated that the government applied policies in various sectors to focus on boosting women's participation in productive activities and hence frequently disregarded concerns surrounding women and reproduction. Men's recruitment for defence during the '80s significantly limited the national budget for social initiatives that may alleviate women's double burden<sup>[25]</sup>. Nonetheless, such intervention permitted women's admission into higher education and typically male-dominated occupations, helping to break down the old gendered division of labour. Despite that, women's labour force participation and union membership expanded considerably throughout the revolution, but they remained concentrated in lower-paying, lower-skilled jobs, and union leadership remained dominated by men<sup>[25]</sup>.

In light of these challenges, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment within trade unions is imperative to ensure the active participation and representation of women in leadership positions, paving the way for enhanced gender equality and a more robust, diverse workforce.

### **3. Conclusion**

The part that follows contains the general conclusion to the entire issue of women's involvement in TU from the standpoint of their driving elements as well as the problems that this gender had to confront when becoming a member of a TU association. This section also provides several recommendations on how women can be encouraged and empowered so that their active participation and involvement in TU can be realized and attained. Achieving equal treatment in the Malaysian workplace may close the gender gap that has ingested the nation for many years.

#### **3.1. Overall conclusion**

According to the findings of this study, various driving elements that impact women's involvement in TU have been identified, with women gradually increasing in TU membership over the last several years, in contrast to the male gender, which has been dropping. Women have always faced prejudice in the workplace since males have occupied the most significant jobs for many years owing to our stereotype and judgement that men should lead and set the path forward. However, women's participation in the labour market has



increased in the last decade as more individuals seek employment for a livelihood, which reflects on both genders, men and women. As a result, workplace concerns such as discrimination, unfairness, unequal role allocation, and others are receiving increased attention.

The TU's engagement in raising women's voices has been focused on issues of uneven employment rights, discrimination, and harassment that women, in particular, have had to face and deal with. As a result, a rise in female TU membership is to be expected, as individuals become more conscious of the significance of speaking up and protecting their rights in the face of discrimination or workplace misbehaviour. The driving elements found in this study can help readers better grasp the issue of women's engagement in TU and how TU performs its function.

Various factors in many industries and people from different aspects make working women go through challenges in trade unions even in the year 2022. These challenges discussed in this paper apply to all female workers, from white-collar people to unskilled workers, and also to migrant workers as well. One of the common challenges is the uneven representation of women in the TU not only in Malaysia but also in other countries in the world as well. Even with limited women representing the TU, the opportunity to give and discuss an opinion is there, but the limelight will be on the majority of those who were male in the union. Their concerns were not prioritised to be taken action upon or even to exchange views about them.

Gender discrimination of female workers in the promotion issue is still serious, despite having the same work performance as men. Even though there were regulations and standards enforced, companies did not meet the management promotion quota because of lack of strict enforcement by the authorities. In addition to the minimal action taken on women's issues in trade unions, some issues were not reported due to discouragement to take over the solution and hostile reaction even when considering this type of problem. Lastly, there are few women in union leadership roles at all levels, particularly at the senior levels, with few women engaging in collective bargaining. Leadership positions remains male-dominated and agreements remain male-oriented. Even though, women's labor-force participation and union membership expanded considerably throughout the revolution, they remained concentrated in lower-paying, lower-skilled jobs, and union leadership remained dominated by men.

### **3.2. Study recommendations**

Throughout this study, the researchers identified numerous significant elements that impact women's decisions to join a trade union with the goal of better empowering women in today's workforce, which is dominated by males. However, some barriers keep women from joining trade unions. This should be investigated more so that a higher understanding of the concerns of women in the TU may enlighten the population on this matter. Aside from that, despite being a member of the TU, which the researchers have covered extensively in prior literature, women who have joined the TU still confront several problems. Due to the challenges that women face in TU, we must find solutions and alternatives capable of opening the door for women to be empowered, particularly in positions of leadership, so that the organisation's goal of achieving fairness in decision-making that involves both genders can be realised. The authors put forward five (5) recommendations to address the issue of women's empowerment in TU and in the workplace, which will eventually lead to a more balanced success where harmony in the community may be reached.

Recommendation 1: Place women as leaders and give them decision-making roles in trade union:

The first piece of advice is to place women in positions of leadership regularly so that they may make choices in the trade union or management hierarchy<sup>[26]</sup>. Giving women the opportunity to run trade unions and organisations is the most successful technique for empowering women. Despite overwhelming evidence that gender equality in leadership benefits business, the great majority of trade unions and organisations continue to have males dominate most leadership roles, with very few opportunities for women to lead. In other words, men dominate the majority of key roles in today's businesses.

Based on Ali et al.<sup>[17]</sup>, suggestion, quotas and adequate women's participation in union leadership are required to overcome the obstacles females face in the trade union organisation. This enforcement would give them a feeling of belonging and encouragement in the system. On the other hand, the quota system for suitable women's representation is typically viewed as a beneficial action of legislation establishing quotas for women to raise gender equality in public life. Under this system, quotas are a legitimate technique for achieving this goal. As a result, enhancing gender equity is a clear win-win strategy that many organizations must implement to advance women's empowerment.

**Recommendation 2: Non-discrimination in employment and equal pay for work of equal value:**

Another way to empower women's engagement in Trade Unions (TUs) within the Malaysian context is to decrease prejudice and negative stereotypes about women's skills. In today's sophisticated culture, where most Malaysians, but not all, have the chance to grow and learn regardless of gender, women have become more involved in the workforce and have begun to fill various prominent positions in top management. It is critical in today's times to eliminate gender discrimination and instead focus on the talents and knowledge that individuals must give to the company. Prejudice is one of the concerns that should be addressed to educate the public about the consequences of discrimination in the workplace.

European Union reports suggest trade unions in Malaysia at all levels should establish a wide range of efforts to promote equality and diversity, addressing the different bases of discrimination through diverse methods, target groups, reach, and activities. It is also suggested that the dual emphasis of internal and external trade union activity in the workplace and society enables chronic prejudice to be addressed via many avenues. Trade unions in Malaysia should carefully assess the need to address workplace discrimination among their members, including training and developing internal knowledge of the necessity of advocating equal treatment and non-discrimination. For example, based on the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, in 2020, a new Code of Conduct for the Promotion of Equal Opportunities was introduced.

Further applying the principle of equal value in Malaysia. For instance, the ILO Convention No. 100 was launched, stating that the right to equal pay for similar efforts should not be limited to equal compensation for the same task but should extend to work of equivalent value. Eliminating variable remuneration for the same job is merely the first step. Where there is widespread employment segregation in Malaysia, the issue is not that women get paid less for doing the same work as men, but that they are concentrated in discounted gendered labor. The notion of labor of equal worth in Malaysia relies on comparing employment requirements such as skill, effort, and responsibility, as well as working circumstances, rather than just the content of the work.

Therefore, fair and non-discriminatory systems are strong management practices in the Malaysian context that help the efficient attainment of corporate goals by promoting maximum output from both male and female employees, strengthening women's trade union members, and encouraging more women workers to join trade unions<sup>[27]</sup>.

**Recommendation 3: Ending the violence and harassment against women in the world of work including the trade union:**

Ending violence and harassment against women in the world of work is essential to increasing their participation in trade unions. As previously mentioned, out of 1010 female workers, 62% of them had undergone workplace sexual harassment<sup>[20]</sup>. The ILO has developed new worldwide standards aimed at eliminating workplace violence and harassment<sup>[26]</sup>. It's the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 190 which is the first-ever international convention to acknowledge workers' right to a workplace free of violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment. This International Labour Conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO) accepted the Convention in June 2019, and it was enforced on 25 June 2021. One of the core principles is "(h) ensuring effective means of inspection and investigation of cases of violence and harassment, including through labour inspectorates or other competent

bodies” which overcomes the biased investigation towards the harasser and encourages the victims (in this context, female workers) to report the cases to the union to get justice.

The ILO even launched a global campaign called # RatifyC1901 to explain in layman’s terms what the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is, what challenges it addresses, and how it attempts to combat workplace violence and harassment governments, employers’ and workers’ groups, civil society organisations, and private corporations, as well as policymakers, businesses, and partners, are all targeted by the campaign. Celebrities also offered their voices to help spread the campaign’s message. In the union, sexual harassment and awareness-raising campaigns were also planned. In support of this, in California, USA, a movement named “Ya Basta” (enough is enough) held a hunger strike in front of the California legislature to end sexual harassment and sexual assault against caretakers and domestic workers<sup>[28]</sup>.

The campaign was successful thanks to the backing of the Service Employees International Union and the Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund, which encouraged female caretakers to take on leadership roles through an anti-sexual assault programme established by the East Los Angeles Women’s Centre. Therefore, the women were educated as community trainers to help other women who had experienced sexual harassment at work. This resulted in the Property Services Workers Protection Act, which compels all caretakers to get anti-sexual harassment training. The government also requires employers to comply with the legislation by 2019. Failure to comply could lead to their business being unable to continue in California, and perpetrators will face criminal charges.

**Recommendation 4: Promoting work-life balance of both female workers and unionists:**

Instead of discriminating against women in the union and workplace, the organisation and trade union should implement a collective agreement that allows women to be paid equally for work of equal value, re-value caring activities for the family, adapt infrastructure and working arrangements, and redirect government spending to benefit both men and women<sup>[29]</sup>. In support of this, a poll called Women, Business, and the Law 2022 (WBL2022) was undertaken, which offers an index encompassing 190 economies and built around the life cycle of a working woman. According to the findings, Malaysia has one of the lowest scores on the indicator assessing regulations impacting women’s jobs after having children, as seen in the **Figure 1** below.



**Figure 1.** Malaysia—Scores for women, business and the law 2022.

To improve the parenthood indicator, Malaysia could consider a collective agreement on flexible working arrangements and benefits, such as attempting to make paid leave of at least fourteen days accessible to mothers, requiring the government to implement 100% of maternity leave benefits, allowing fathers to take paid leave, providing paid parental leave, and prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant workers. Furthermore, a company-wide collective agreement on supporting care obligations, childcare, paternity leave, and family leave will be able to help women workers manage their family responsibilities and enhance health and parenting more beneficially. Simultaneously, social partners, including labour and employer representatives, have a crucial part to play in changing practises via social discourse to guarantee that genuine equality between men and women becomes a reality<sup>[29]</sup>.

In support of that, throughout a three-year campaign, the IndustriALL Malaysia women’s committee, a

collaboration of global union affiliates, has achieved 14 weeks of maternity leave and the introduction of one-week paternity leave. Malaysian women workers will now enjoy 14 weeks of maternity leave, and their husbands will be entitled to one-week paternity leave. The co-chairperson of the IndustriALL Malaysia women's committee further suggests that the government should also ratify ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection since domestic law will soon comply with the international standard<sup>[30]</sup>. As a result, it can empower women to join trade unions because they can be involved in both their job and the trade union while maintaining a flexible work-life balance.

## Author contributions

Conceptualization, FI, RHAR and CSW; methodology, FI and RHAR; formal analysis, RHAR and CSW; supervision, FI. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Arumugam J, Livan L. Where are the women leaders, MTUC? Available online: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/543440> (accessed on 11 September 2022).
2. Ali MA, Wakili SG, Liberty FS. Women empowerment in trade union movements: A strategy for national and economic development. *Journal of Economic Info.* 2021; 8(3): 130-145. doi: 10.31580/jei.v8i3.2057
3. Otieno OG, Wandeda DO, Mwamadzingo M. Trade union membership dynamics amidst COVID-19: Does social dialogue matter? *International Journal of Labour Research.* 2021; 10(1): 1-12.
4. Murugiah S. Malaysia ranked 103 on Global Gender Gap Index 2022. Available online: <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/malaysia-ranked-103-global-gender-gap-index-2022> (accessed on 2 September 2022).
5. Kok X. Women's rights: why Singapore wants to change the way we think about gender equality. Available online: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3105675/womens-rights-why-singapore-wants-change-way-we-think-about> (accessed on 1 September 2022).
6. World Economic Forum. Global Gender Gap Report. Available online: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/> (accessed on 2 September 2022).
7. Supian C, Nor M. Trade Unions: Relevant Out of Irrelevant? A Study on Generation's Perception in Malaysia. *International Journal of Human Resource Studies.* 2018; 8(3): 38. doi: 10.5296/ijhrs.v8i3.11929
8. Rubery J, Johnson M. Closing the Gender Pay Gap: What Role for Trade Unions? Available online: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms\\_684156.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_684156.pdf) (accessed on 9 September 2022).
9. Arissa N, Yusoff M, Othman NA, et al. What influence employees' intention to join a union? In: *Proceedings of the E-Proceeding 8th International Conference on Public Policy and Social Science; 2021.* pp. 575-578.
10. Pacris TLM, Geges DB. Factors Affecting Women's Participation in Selected Trade Union Groups in Laguna, Philippines. *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR).* 2015; 24(4): 65-82.
11. Hisamdin HA. NUBE members picket at HSBC bank. Available online: <https://www.freemalysiatoday.com/category/nation/2022/03/10/nube-members-picket-at-hsbc-bank/> (accessed on 2 September 2022).
12. Malaysia Kini (MK). Where are the women leaders, MTUC? Available online: <https://www.malaysiakini.com/letters/543440> (accessed on 8 September 2022).
13. Better Work. Women take on a greater role in the union, despite challenges. Available online: <https://betterwork.org/2022/03/08/women-take-on-a-greater-role-in-the-union-despite-challenges/> (accessed on 29 August 2022).
14. Hernes HM. Women and the welfare state: the transition from private to public dependence. In: *Women and the State.* Routledge; 2018. pp. 72-92.
15. Tinuoye AT, Ogharanduku VI, Egbanubi MA, et al. Gender and Trade Unionism Advancing Female Participation and Representation in the Nigerian Context. In: *Research Anthology on Challenges for Women in Leadership Roles.* IGI Global; 2021. pp. 870-887.
16. Berita Harian. Promotion discrimination of female workers is still serious (Indonesian). Available online: <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2017/12/364884/diskriminasi-kenaikan-pangkat-pekerja-wanita-masih-serius> (accessed on 31 August 2022).
17. Ali AM, Zakuan AAUA, Mohammad BZ. Northern Nigerian women participation in trade union movement: Impediments and Solutions. *Journal of Humanities and Cultures Studies R&D.* 2018; 4(4): 1-12.

18. Chung H, van der Lippe T. Flexible Working, Work-Life Balance, and Gender Equality: Introduction. *Social Indicators Research*. 2018; 151(2): 365-381. doi: 10.1007/s11205-018-2025-x
19. Zaiton O, Nooraini O. A literatural review on work discrimination among women employees. *Asian Social Science*. 2015; 11(4): 26. doi: 10.5539/ass.v11n4p26
20. Aljazeera. New sexual harassment bill edges closer to law in Malaysia. Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/19/sexual-assault#:~:text=According%20to%20a%202020%20survey,is%20left%20to%20the%20employer.s> (accessed on 1 September 2022).
21. Mondaq. Malaysia: Sexual Harassment in The Workplace. Available online: <https://www.mondaq.com/employment-litigation-tribunals/1142332/sexual-harassment-in-the-workplace> (accessed on 9 September 2022).
22. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Sexual harassment of women: climate, culture, and consequences in academic sciences, engineering, and medicine. 2018.
23. Artus I, Holland J. Trade Unions, Collective Bargaining and Gender in Germany. In: *Social Partners and Gender Equality*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham; 2022. pp. 223-244.
24. Mekonnen GA. Women's in Leadership Position "Issues and Challenges." *International Journal of Political Activism and Engagement*. 2019; 6(1): 25-38. doi: 10.4018/ijpae.2019010102
25. Chuchryk PM. Women in the Revolution. In: *Revolution and counterrevolution in Nicaragua*. Routledge; 2019. pp. 143-166.
26. International Labour Organization. Empowering Women at Work—Trade Union Policies and Practices for Gender Equality. ILO Publishing; 2022.
27. Suleman D. Women Discrimination in Malaysia: Examining 'The Gender Agenda' from the Viewpoint of Lenore Manderson's Women, Politics, and Change. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. Published online 2021. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3849824
28. UNWOMEN. Awareness-raising and campaigns. Available online: <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1988-awareness-raising-and-campaigns.html> (accessed on 2 September 2022).
29. International Labour Organization (ILO). Empowering Women at Work. Trade Union Policies and Practices for Gender Equality. Swizerland: International Labour Office; 2020. p. 78.
30. IndustriALL. Unions in Malaysia win increased maternity leave. Available online: <https://www.industriall-union.org/unions-in-malaysia-win-increased-maternity-leave> (accessed on 10 September 2022).