

## **Women's Empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia: The Autonomy of Women in Household Decision-Making**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ensuring gender equality and empowering women is crucial, as they play a significant role in driving economic and societal development. This study examines women's empowerment levels in Malaysia and Indonesia, two neighbouring countries with a predominantly Muslim population. Data were obtained from the Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2014 and the Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey 2017. A total of 5,175 Malaysian and 34,467 Indonesian married women aged 15–49 were selected for this study. The variables used include women's autonomy in household decision-making (a proxy for women's empowerment), educational level, work status, place of residence, number of children, and women's age. Findings reveal that Malaysia has a higher proportion of women with tertiary education than Indonesia (25.2% versus 14.7%). However, the proportion of women who were employed was lower in Malaysia than in Indonesia (45.4% versus 57.0%). Concerning household decision-making participation, approximately 46% of Malaysian women participated in all household decisions, as compared to 73% among Indonesian women. Binary logistic regression analysis indicates that all selected independent variables, except the place of residence, were significantly associated with women's autonomy in household decision-making in both countries at the multivariate level. Women's socio-

economic characteristics greatly influence their status in the household and decision-making autonomy. Enhancing women's education and employability can empower them and strengthen their decision-making autonomy.

*Keywords:* Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey, Malaysian Population and Family Survey, women's empowerment, women's autonomy in household decision-making

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## INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality is vital as women are important contributors to economic and societal development. Therefore, it is essential to enhance the position of women and foster their empowerment at various institutional and societal levels. The United Nations (UN) established Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the blueprint to improve the lives and prospects of every individual globally, and special attention is given particularly to women and marginalised groups (UN, 2015, 2021b). Despite the continuous efforts to achieve gender equality, enormous challenges and obstacles remain pervasive, such as the underrepresentation of women in political leadership, violence against women, and gender discrimination in the workplace, especially in developing countries (UN, 2021a).

Gender inequality is prevalent in Asian countries. The score of the Gender Inequality Index (GII) in East Asia and the Pacific region was 0.324, which indicated that the inequality in the region was relatively high (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). In addition, it was reported that East Asia and the Pacific region required about 165 years to achieve gender parity (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2021). The primary focus of this study is to examine the levels of women's empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia, two neighbouring Southeast Asian countries that share similar religious norms and beliefs.

The levels of women's empowerment differed markedly between Malaysia and

Indonesia, ranging from health to socio-economic aspects. Malaysian women received better reproductive health care than the Indonesian women. The maternal mortality ratio (MMR) in Malaysia was lower at 29 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to 177 in Indonesia in 2019. In addition, the adolescent birth rate was also lower in Malaysia (13.4 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19) as compared to Indonesia (47.4) in 2019 (UNDP, 2020). Meanwhile, Malaysian women have greater access to higher education than Indonesian women. The tertiary enrolment rate in Malaysia was 49.9%, compared to 39.0% in Indonesia in 2020. The female labour force participation rate was slightly higher in Indonesia, reported at 56.0% in 2020, compared to 55.5% in Malaysia. Regarding political empowerment, the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women was only 14.9% in Malaysia, which was much lower than that in Indonesia (21.1%) in 2020 (WEF, 2021). Despite Malaysian women having better access to reproductive health care services and educational opportunities than Indonesian women, the overall gender gap in Malaysia was higher than in Indonesia. Based on the Gender Gap Report 2021, Indonesia had closed 68.8% of gender gaps, while Malaysia had closed 67.6% of gender gaps (WEF, 2021). Thus, the underlying reasons contributing to gender equality need to be addressed.

Kabeer (1999) proposed a framework that conceptualised women's empowerment into three dimensions: resources, agency, and achievement. Resources, which include material, human, and social resources, are

served to improve the power to exercise choice. Access to these resources will reflect the rules and norms that govern society's distribution. For example, the head is endowed with decision-making power under their position within the household. Agency refers to the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Besides decision-making, the agency can be operationalised through bargaining and negotiation. Lastly, achievement refers to well-being outcomes. Altogether, the agency is the centre of the empowerment concept, resources are the medium through which agency is exercised, and achievement is the outcome of agency (Kabeer, 2005).

The three empowerment dimensions are interrelated (Kabeer, 1999). However, the achievements dimension is not frequently utilised to assess empowerment since it requires a clear distinction between the differences in making choices and the inequality in the ability to make choices. Because not all individuals are given equal rights in decision-making and taking action, gender inequality prevails in achievement. Consequently, resources and agency are the two most frequently addressed facets of women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002). However, resources are usually viewed as the prospective enabling factor to promote empowerment (Malhotra et al., 2002). Moreover, resources are affected by other factors, such as socio-economic status, social norms, and culture (Govindasamy & Malhotra, 1996; Malhotra & Mather, 1997). In consequence, using resources as a proxy for empowerment could result in conceptually ambiguous

and misleading findings (Samari & Pebley, 2015).

Richardson (2017) advised employing a direct indicator of empowerment. The agency, which is the direct indicator of women's empowerment, is deemed an appropriate dimension to capture women's empowerment (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002; Richardson, 2017). Furthermore, Kabeer (1999) asserted that the agency domain tends to operationalise as decision-making in the social science context. Hence, this study adapts the agency domain in selecting the women's empowerment measure and focuses on women's empowerment at the household level, particularly women's autonomy in household decision-making.

Women's autonomy in household decision-making was a commonly used measure to represent women's empowerment at the household level (Kishor & Subaiya, 2005; Lamidi, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2002; Oyediran, 2016). There are several past studies investigating women's empowerment in Malaysia (Al-Shami et al., 2017; Yusof, 2015; Yusof & Duasa, 2010) and Indonesia (Colfer et al., 2015; Rizkianti et al., 2020). However, empirical studies of women's empowerment in Malaysia focused primarily on women's financial decision-making instead of their decision-making on household matters. In contrast, the empirical studies of women's empowerment in Indonesia focused on women's household decision-making. Another Indonesian study by Ng and Tey (2018) restricted the women's empowerment indicators to women's perceptions towards

wife beating justifications and safer sex negotiation. Hence, this study aims to fill in the research gap by examining the levels of women's empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia, using women's autonomy in household decision-making as a proxy for women's empowerment.

The gender gaps in Malaysia and Indonesia worsened from 2020 to 2021 (WEF, 2021). It indicates that more efforts are needed to close the gender gaps in both countries. Hence, it is essential to identify the factors associated with women's empowerment, particularly their involvement in household decision-making, to provide some insights to policymakers in formulating strategies to elevate the status of women. In addition, women's educational level and work status will also be discussed.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Study Design

The data for this study were obtained from the Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey (MPFS-5) 2014 and the Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey 2017 (IDHS 2017). The Malaysian Population and Family Survey (MPFS) has been conducted every 10 years since 1974 by the National Population and Family Development Board (NPFDB). Meanwhile, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) is a nationally representative population-based survey with a large sample. Both survey data were collected through face-to-face interviews. The sample for both datasets was selected using a two-stage stratified sampling design,

with a selection of enumeration areas/blocks drawn from the census in each country (Mahmud et al., 2016; National Population and Family Planning Board et al., 2018). The MPFS-5 covered ever-married women aged 15–59, whereas the IDHS 2017 included all women aged 15–49. This study focused on 5,175 Malaysian and 34,467 Indonesian currently married women aged 15–49 years.

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for this study was women's autonomy in household decision-making (as a proxy for women's empowerment). The two surveys employed different items in measuring women's empowerment: eight items in MPFS-5 and three items in IDHS 2017. For standardisation purposes, the items selected for this study covered the decision-making in household expenses and visits to family members. The four items used to measure household decision-making autonomy in Malaysia include decision-making in basic family expenses, buying/building a house, buying assets, and holiday/visiting family members. In Indonesia, household decision-making was measured from large household purchases and visits to family/relatives. Each item of the household decision-making was recorded as "involved in decision-making" if women had a say in decision-making, either individually or jointly with husbands/family members, and "did not involve in decision-making" if otherwise. Women were deemed to have high empowerment if they were involved in making all the selected household decisions.

**Independent Variables**

Several demographic and socio-economic variables were used in this study. These include women's age (<25, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49), place of residence (rural and urban), women's educational level (no education/primary, secondary, and tertiary), women's work status (not working, working), and the number of living children (no children, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and above).

**Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using SPSS version 25.0. Cross-tabulations were presented to show the level of women's empowerment in each country. A Chi-square test (or Fisher's exact test for a 2\*2 contingency table) was used to examine the bivariate association between women's empowerment and the

independent variables. Binary logistic regression was used to investigate the association between women's empowerment and selected demographic and socio-economic variables in Malaysia and Indonesia at the multivariate level.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of married women by educational level, work status, and household decision-making autonomy in Malaysia and Indonesia. In Malaysia, the percentage of women with tertiary education stood at 25.2%, higher than the corresponding figure in Indonesia (14.7%). In contrast, about 45% of Malaysian women worked, which was lower than that in Indonesia (57.0%). About 46% of Malaysian women participated in

Table 1

*Percentage distribution of married women by educational level, work status, and household decision-making autonomy in Malaysia and Indonesia*

Variables	Malaysia	Indonesia
	n (%)	n (%)
<b>Total</b>	5,175 (100.0)	34,467 (100.0)
<b>Educational level</b>		
No education/Primary	637 (12.3)	11,445 (33.2)
Secondary	3,232 (62.5)	17,956 (52.1)
Tertiary	1,306 (25.2)	5,066 (14.7)
<b>Work status</b>		
Not working	2,825 (54.6)	14,813 (43.0)
Working	2,350 (45.4)	19,630 (57.0)
<b>Household decision-making autonomy</b>		
Low empowerment	2,713 (54.3)	9,158 (26.6)
High empowerment	2,284 (45.7)	25,257 (73.4)

*Note.* Missing values are excluded from the calculations

all household decisions, whereas this figure was considerably higher at 73.4% among Indonesian women.

Table 2 presents the proportion of women with high empowerment by women's demographic and socio-economic characteristics. Women's age was associated with women's empowerment in both countries. The proportion of women with a say in all household decisions increased with age in Indonesia, and a similar pattern was observed in Malaysia, except for those aged 45–49 years. Meanwhile, urban women have higher levels of empowerment than rural women in household decision-making in Malaysia and Indonesia. Besides that, women's educational level was positively

associated with women's autonomy in household decision-making in both countries.

Working women tended to be more empowered in household decision-making, with 53.8% and 74.6% of the working Malaysian and Indonesian women participating in all household decisions. Meanwhile, Malaysian and Indonesian women with two to four children were more empowered in household decision-making. It is worth noting that Indonesian women with at least five children recorded the lowest proportion of high empowerment across the number of children groups, while that was reported among Malaysian women with less than two children.

Table 2

*Percentage of married women having high empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia*

Variables	Malaysia		Indonesia	
	n	High empowerment (%)	n	High empowerment (%)
<b>Age (years)</b>		***		***
< 25	367	31.7	3,840	66.5
25–29	740	39.3	5,426	71.8
30–34	997	44.5	6,539	71.2
35–39	968	48.6	6,956	72.4
40–44	1,021	52.1	6,273	74.4
45–49	1,082	46.9	5,433	74.6
<b>Place of residence</b>		**		**
Rural	1,912	42.6	17,147	71.5
Urban	3,263	47.5	17,320	72.8
<b>Educational level</b>		***		***
No education/Primary	637	41.5	11,445	69.8
Secondary	3,232	43.4	17,956	72.4
Tertiary	1,306	53.4	5,066	78.0
<b>Work status</b>		***		***
Not working	2,825	38.9	14,813	69.1

Table 2 (Continue)

Variables	Malaysia		Indonesia	
	n	High empowerment (%)	n	High empowerment (%)
<b>Work status</b>		***		***
Working	2,350	53.8	19,630	74.6
<b>Number of living children</b>		**		**
No children	449	42.1	2,660	71.4
1	790	41.3	8,340	71.1
2	1,102	47.0	11,554	73.2
3	1,179	48.0	6,811	72.1
4	823	49.7	3,005	73.2
5 and above	832	42.8	2,097	69.2

Notes. Missing values are excluded from the calculations. Chi-square/Fisher's exact test significance: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Table 3 shows the binary logistic regression analysis of women's empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia. The output reveals that women's age, educational level, work status, and number of living children were significantly associated with women's autonomy in household decision-making in both countries at the multivariate level.

Malaysian women aged 30 and above were more empowered in household decision-making than those below 25 years. The likelihood of women having a say in all household decisions increased with age in Indonesia. The age effect on household decision-making autonomy was stronger in Malaysia after controlling for other variables in the model. Malaysian women with tertiary educational levels (AOR = 1.446; 95% CI = 1.159, 1.788) were more empowered in

household decision-making than those who never attended school or studied until the primary level. The likelihood of women having a say in all household decisions increased with women's educational level in Indonesia. Notably, the educational effect on household decision-making autonomy was stronger in Indonesia. The odds of working women having a say in all household decisions were higher than that of their non-working counterparts in Malaysia (AOR = 1.641; 95% CI = 1.455, 1.850) and Indonesia (AOR = 1.231; 95% CI = 1.173, 1.291), and the employment effect on household decision-making autonomy was stronger in Malaysia. Indonesian women with at least five children were less likely to have a say in all household decisions than childless women (AOR = 0.808, 95% CI = 0.697, 0.937).

Table 3

*Adjusted odds ratios (AOR) and 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) from binary logistic regression analysis of women's empowerment in Malaysia and Indonesia*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>	<b>Indonesia</b>
<b>Age (years)</b>	***	***
<25	REF	REF
25–29	1.126 (0.849, 1.492)	1.235*** (1.127, 1.352)
30–34	1.340* (1.012, 1.774)	1.211*** (1.103, 1.329)
35–39	1.630** (1.222, 2.175)	1.321*** (1.200, 1.454)
40–44	1.962*** (1.469, 2.621)	1.501*** (1.357, 1.660)
45–49	1.634** (1.222, 2.184)	1.545*** (1.394, 1.713)
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Rural	REF	REF
Urban	1.106 (0.979, 1.248)	0.982 (0.936, 1.031)
<b>Educational level</b>	***	***
No education/Primary	REF	REF
Secondary	1.060 (0.884, 1.271)	1.210*** (1.147, 1.276)
Tertiary	1.446** (1.159, 1.788)	1.521*** (1.396, 1.657)
<b>Work status</b>	***	***
Not working	REF	REF
Working	1.641*** (1.455, 1.850)	1.231*** (1.173, 1.291)
<b>Number of living children</b>	*	**
No children	REF	REF
1	1.053 (0.822, 1.348)	0.993 (0.902, 1.094)
2	1.193 (0.940, 1.514)	1.010 (0.914, 1.116)
3	1.205 (0.944, 1.537)	0.931 (0.835, 1.039)
4	1.268 (0.976, 1.647)	0.982 (0.861, 1.119)
5 and above	0.960 (0.735, 1.253)	0.808** (0.697, 0.937)
<b>Constant</b>	0.325***	1.579***

*Notes.* Wald test significance: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ . Values in parentheses are 95% confidence intervals.

## DISCUSSION

Under similar religious norms and belief settings, the levels of women's empowerment differed significantly between Malaysia and Indonesia and within each country. More Indonesian women had worked compared to Malaysian women, although the proportion of women who

received tertiary education was higher in Malaysia. It could be explained by the fact that Malaysian women with children would rather leave the labour force and fulfil their responsibility as a wife and mothers even if they are graduates from university and hence the lower female labour force participation rate in Malaysia (Mohd Yusoff et al., 2021).

On a different note, Gimenez-Nadal et al. (2012) suggested that self-employment gives mothers greater control over the timing of work and greater flexibility in work-life balance. As observed, a higher percentage of female workers in Indonesia were self-employed than in Malaysia (59.0% versus 28.8% in 2019) (World Bank, 2022). Consequently, Indonesian women have greater resilience in juggling the roles of workers and mothers, are more economically independent, and thus more empowered in household decision-making than Malaysian women.

This study found that educated women were more empowered in the household, and the result was consistent with past studies (Ng & Tey, 2018; Shoaib et al., 2012; Tabassum et al., 2019; Yusof, 2015). Better-educated women are more aware of their rights (Shoaib et al., 2012) with better exposure to modern gender norms. This, in turn, contributed to their empowerment within the household. Meanwhile, working women were more empowered in household decision-making. This result was similar to the past studies by Acharya et al. (2010), Lamidi (2016) and Tabassum et al. (2019). Working women can contribute to the household financially and subsequently strengthen their say in household decision-making.

Women residing in urban areas were presumed to be more empowered in household decision-making as they had greater access to facilities and job opportunities that could strengthen their financial independence (Brajesh & Shekhar,

2015). However, this study found that place of residence was not significantly associated with women's empowerment at the multivariate level. This finding was similar to the study by Pambè et al. (2014), where the place of residence was a significant variable at the bivariate level but became insignificant at the multivariate level. Urban women tend to have higher educational levels. They are more likely to join the labour force than their rural counterparts, and this explains the insignificant effect of place of residence in the multivariate context. It indicates that women will have a say in household decision-making regardless of their place of residence if provided with equal education and employment opportunities.

Women's age was significantly associated with women's autonomy in household decision-making in both countries. The level of women's empowerment increased with age. This finding was consistent with the past studies by Acharya et al. (2010) and Brajesh and Shekhar (2015). As women age, they leave their childbearing responsibilities (Acharya et al., 2010), giving them more say in the family.

In Indonesia, women with five or more children were less likely to decide on all household decisions. The finding was similar to the past study by Upadhyay et al. (2014), where the number of children was inversely related to women's empowerment. Women with more children had less time to practice their rights and authority because they spent more time on childrearing; this, in turn, caused them to be less empowered (Ali

Sheikh et al., 2016). Besides that, some past studies discovered a negative relationship between women's empowerment and fertility (Atake & Gnakou Ali, 2019; Castro Lopes et al., 2022), indicating that empowered women tended to have lesser children due to the higher authority in deciding on fertility-related matters.

Uplifting women's status is essential for sustainable development. Gender inequality led to the inferior status of women, whereby their rights were neglected. Therefore, education is key to uplifting women's status and empowering them. Education enables women to identify their strengths and create self-awareness of their rights for a better future. In addition, educated women are more likely to participate in the labour force and be economically independent, thus improving their socio-economic status and living standards (Devaraj & Amirthavalli, 2016). The government should allocate more funds to the public education system to reduce the financial burden of the household to increase the female school enrolment rate, especially at the tertiary level. For instance, the Indonesian government may consider emulating the tertiary education loan scheme in Malaysia (provided by the National Higher Education Fund Corporation) to assist students in pursuing tertiary education. Given the substantial educational effect on women's autonomy in household decision-making in Indonesia, ensuring gender equality in accessing higher education will go a long way towards empowering women.

The government and policymakers should also promote gender equality in the workplace. A study found that women are often discriminated against in the labour market for opportunities, training, and wages (Ameratunga Kring, 2017). Working mothers faced an additional childcare burden that constrained their employment opportunities. Besides, women are often burdened with unpaid domestic and care work compared to men, restraining them from participating in the labour force (UN, 2021a). Therefore, eliminating the discrimination and stereotypes of women in the workplace is essential. The government should enforce the regulations on providing childcare services in the workplace. Given the considerable employment effect on women's autonomy in household decision-making in Malaysia, meeting the childcare needs of working mothers is necessary to facilitate more women to participate and remain in the workforce. In addition, the government should allocate funds to provide training and support for women to develop and enhance their skills to improve their competencies in the labour market.

The obstacles in achieving gender equality, such as gender discrimination in the workplace and factors impeding female labour force participation, need to be identified, and relevant strategies should be implemented to overcome these obstacles. For instance, Malaysia's National Women's Policy and Women Development Action Plan focused on improving gender equality and empowering women (Department of Women's Development, 2021). Besides

that, the Indonesian government considered aspects of gender equality and women's empowerment in the National Long-Term Development Plan (Siscawati et al., 2020). These policies have successfully reduced gender disparities in Malaysia and Indonesia. However, it is necessary to conduct a mid-term review to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies to ensure that women are not left behind.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study utilised the nationally representative sample of MPFS-5 2014 and IDHS 2017 to examine the factors associated with women's empowerment in two neighbouring countries where most population are Muslims, whereby the relevant past studies are scarce. Notwithstanding its strengths, it is essential to acknowledge a few limitations of this study. First, the measure of women's empowerment used in this study is subjected to the household-level variable, which is women's autonomy in household decision-making due to data availability. Although the two countries used slightly different items to measure women's household decision-making autonomy, the items selected in this study fall under a similar context, representing women's roles in making decisions on daily expenses and household purchases, visits to family, and relatives. Besides, only married women or women in a union were selected. In addition, the causal relationship between women's empowerment and demographic and socio-economic characteristics could not be established due to the cross-sectional nature

of this study. The relatively low female labour force participation rate in Malaysia is not further discussed due to the lack of information on its reasons. Hence, future research should be conducted to fill the gap.

### **CONCLUSION**

Women played a vital role in the development of a country. Therefore, their contributions to the country's growth should not be neglected. Women could be empowered and actively participate in household decision-making through improved education and employability. This study provided some insights to policymakers in considering the aspects that should be focused on in developing strategies to uplift women's status in Malaysia and Indonesia.

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