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## GENDER EQUALITY IN THE RENEWABLES: THE CASE OF A SUCCESSFUL MALAYSIAN FEMALE ENTREPRENEUR

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### Abstract

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals have highlighted the importance of gender equality in sustainable economic development, providing an avenue to research that aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable economic growth. This study delves into the issue in the context of Malaysian renewable energy sector, particularly the engineering field. Is there any gender inequality in this male-dominated industry? Specifically, the study aims to investigate issues and barriers for females entering the renewable energy sector in Malaysia, by analyzing the case of Chow Pui Hee (Chow), founder of Samaiden Group Berhad. As an engineer turned entrepreneur, Chow is also one of the Malaysian pioneering female leaders in the energy sector. While she was lucky to start her business with great support from her family, there have been instances of indirect gender discrimination, based on her observations on employees. Chow has also called upon the Malaysian government to reconsider the policy of 98-day parental leave, aimed at addressing gender disparities in workplace, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on gender equality in the Malaysian workforce. This study sheds light on potential systemic issues that may hamper gender inequality and female participation in Malaysian renewable energy industry, and the potential solution to the issue, contributing to the U.N.'s achievement of SDG 5 – Gender Equality.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, Renewable Energy Sector, Young Malaysian Female Entrepreneur, Female Engineer, Gender Discrimination

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## 1. Introduction

Malaysia is a developing country which demands more energy than developed countries due to its rapid economic growth. While the rapid demand on energy potentially results in economic growth, it poses an energy crisis in the long term as well as leads to variability and a significant amount of carbon emissions. Currently, the Malaysian primary energy source of electricity power generation is fossil fuel which is widely accepted as unsustainable due to its environmental consequences and resource depletion, particularly after the 21st century (Ahmad *et al.* 2023). As such, it is of utmost importance to explore alternative energy sources to cater for the growing demands of the Malaysian population and economy.

In order to reduce the Malaysian dependence on fossil fuel, renewables such as solar, wind, and geothermal play a crucial role as the source of alternative energy. Using these renewable energies helps to increase the availability of natural resources (Tawiah *et al.* 2021). Additionally, renewables contribute to energy security by diversifying the energy mix, thereby reducing vulnerability to changes of fossil fuel price and supply disruptions. Taken together, renewable energy serves as a viable and vital alternative for energy consumption in Malaysia.

There are two major types of renewable natural resources consumed in Malaysia: hydropower and solar energy. These sources have accounted for an average of 5-6% of the country's energy consumption in the past five years (Progressture Solar, 2023). Hydropower, being one of the most established renewable sources, has been utilized for decades, providing a stable and reliable supply of electricity. On the other hand, solar energy has seen significant growth in recent years, with numerous solar farms being developed by both the public and private sectors, across the country.

The Malaysian government has also implemented an array of policies and incentives to promote the adoption of renewable energy, including feed-in tariffs, tax exemptions, and subsidies for renewable energy projects. In 2021, the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Malaysia (KeTSA) set a target to reach a 31% share of renewable energy in the national installed capacity mix by 2025, compared to the mere current share of 23%. This ambitious target is part of Malaysia's broader strategy to transition itself towards a more sustainable energy system which continuously reduce carbon footprint. This target supports Malaysia's global climate commitment to reducing the economy-wide carbon intensity by 45% in 2030, compared to level in 2005 (Malaysia's Approach towards Renewable Energy, 2023).

Achieving the goals of environmental sustainability (Climate Action) requires significant investments in renewable energy infrastructure, advancements in technology, and increased public awareness and support for sustainable energy practices. By embracing renewable energy, Malaysia not only can address its energy challenges but also can contribute to global efforts to combat climate change and ensure a cleaner, greener future for generations to come. Nonetheless, aspect of gender is excluded in the energy sector-specific policies, (Han *et al.* 2022) despite its importance for carbon intensity reduction. According to Ergas *et al.* (2021), women's participation in parliament and education can reduce carbon intensity, indicating that gender equality does matter to reduction in carbon emission.

## 2. The gender inequality issue

Based on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2023), under the category of senior leadership positions, women held only 32.2%, despite making up 41.9% of the overall workforce. In addition, women are poorly represented and remain significantly underrepresented in male-dominated industries like oil, gas, mining, and infrastructure. The representation of women in energy policy and decision-making positions has also been severely limited (Hasnan, 2019). Take the 2017 report of the International Energy Agency (IEA) titled "Women in Clean Energy," which highlights the insufficient representation of women in leadership roles within the

clean-energy sector, as another example of poor female representation in the energy sector. The lack of female representation in the clean energy sector might be due to limited access to career progression prospects, the absence of guidance from mentors, and societal norms that prioritize men in technical and leadership positions.

The low female participation rate has been deteriorating, particularly in the global renewable energy (RE) industry. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA, 2023), the proportion of women engaging in the renewable energy industry drops significantly due to limited access to education and technical training for women, in addition to existing gender biases and inadequate organizational policies that fail to sufficiently foster female participation. Recently, despite improvements observed in the engagement of women in the energy sector, they are still plagued by issues of limited coverage by major media (Satyanegara, 2022), low diversity and consistency in voicing viewpoints (Hoang, 2021), and limited participation in technical as well as managerial positions in the sector (Baruah, 2017; Vangchuay and Niklaus, 2021; IRENA, 2019).

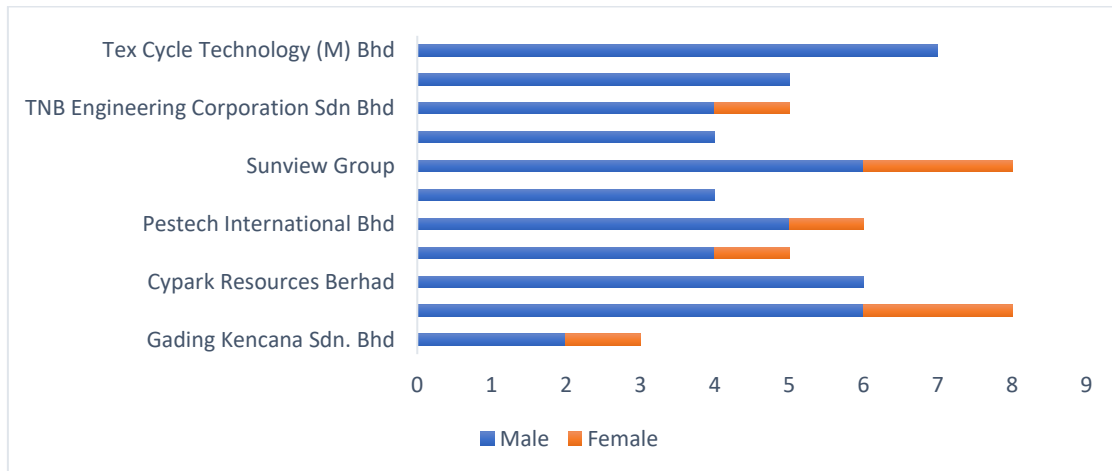
Alongside Asia's deficient performance in gender equality, Malaysia's gender inequality issue has been exacerbating. For example, the representation of women in the energy sector varies from a mere 3 to 15 percent in Malaysia. Based on the report released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), in the second quarter of 2023, the female participation rate in the labor force was 56.2 percent, out of a 100 percent available female labor in the country. This percentage is much lower than the male counterpart's (82.3%), out of the 100 percent available male labor in the nation. Notably, in the technology industry, one of the male-dominated industries, it is indicated that women only make up 35% of the workforce, though they possess a strong proficiency in soft skills such as creativity and problem-solving skill.

On the other hand, although women have achieved remarkable educational attainment, almost on par with men (scoring 0.995), their political empowerment has received the lowest score, i.e., 0.102, indicating that women still trail behind men in the political sphere (United Nations Development Program, 2023). As a result, Malaysia has a long way to go to achieve gender equality (SDG 5), as it has made no progress in the principal areas of overarching legal frameworks and public life; violence against women; employment and economic benefit; as well as marriage and family. According to Nathesan (2017), who commented in *New Straits Time*, women are still treated unequally in the labor market due to the discriminatory organizational culture, despite having the same qualifications as men.

The Malaysian renewable energy sector is not an exception to the gender inequality issue. While the total amount of renewable energy usage in Malaysia has been increasing by 50 percent from 2012 to 2021, resulting from the utilization of hydropower and solar energy, the issue of gender inequality in the sector remains a challenge. According to Bursa Malaysia (2022), there are only 12 females taking part in the tactical level of positions in the sector. Moreover, the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 ranked Malaysia 103rd out of 146 nations, achieving a score of 0.681, a significant distance from the maximum score of 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the ratio between males and females in the tactical level of positions in the Malaysian Renewable Energy Sector in 2022. It can be clearly observed that the gender gap in the leadership of the Malaysian renewable energy sector is extremely wide, with the positions held skewed towards males in general.

While Malaysian women continue to face challenges in attaining equitable treatment, particularly in male-dominated industries like the renewable energy industry (other examples include engineering industry, construction industry, technology industry, oil and gas industry, and mining industry), recently, there have been limited gender-equality-related studies on the industry (Yoder, 2002), on the tokenism process; Davey (2008), on organizational politics as a gender process; and Linehan and Scullion (2008), on the career development of global female managers in general). This study aims to examine the issue of gender inequality in the Malaysian male-dominated energy sector. Malaysia, one of the Asian Tigers in the 1990s, has been stuck in the middle-income trap for decades, despite its rapid growth, particularly in the 1990s. Could the answer partly lie in gender inequality in the renewable energy sector?



**Figure 1: Ratio between male and female in tactical level of position in the Malaysian renewable energy sector, in year 2022**  
 Source: Bursa Malaysia, 2022

Furthermore, while the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) (2020) reported that job creation (directly and indirectly) resulting from the renewable energy sector surpassed an astonishing 11.5 million in 2019, questions remain on how job opportunities are allocated across genders and how females are to participate in these opportunities. Women carry 32% of renewable energy jobs, which is lower than the 47% average of the global workforce (IRENA 2019)—the average of jobs from all sectors and countries. Particularly, women hold only 28% of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-related jobs in the renewable energy sector, compared to an average of an average of 50% in all sectors and countries.

These statistics and gender-related issues further prompt the following questions worthy of pondering: Are there any barriers for women to enter the Malaysian renewable energy sector? Are there any gender inequality issues in the Malaysian renewable energy sector? This study aims to address these questions by conducting a case study on one of the pioneering Malaysian female leaders in the renewable energy sector, Ms. Chow Pui Hee (Chow), founder of Samaiden Group Berhad. Chow is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur. Prior to venturing into entrepreneurship, Chow used to be a chemical engineer and was actively involved in waste management.

Aspects of the analysis in this study involve Chow's experience and point of view on gender inequality issues and her predictions on gender inequality-related issues in her company, Samaiden as well as in the Malaysian renewable energy sector. In order to address the complicated nature of gender justice in the context of energy transitions and provide concrete inputs for policy uptake, it is necessary to further foster the growing realization of the importance of gender inclusion in the larger energy-transition scenario. Otherwise, the goal of societal traction for energy transitions will be a failure due to increasing moral concern about gender justice, universal energy access, and inclusiveness (Connell, 2014). Countries run the risk of not only missing out on the economic potential of women but also unintentionally sustaining oppressive traditional gender roles by ignoring a sizeable portion of the labor market.

### 3. Background of Samaiden Group Berhad

Established in 2014 and headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, Samaiden Group Berhad is a Malaysia-based investment holding company specializing in renewable energy, with a focus on solar, biomass, and biogas. The company's core activities encompass the creation, construction, operation, and maintenance of renewable energy power facilities in Malaysia and throughout Southeast Asia. As the pioneer in this field, Samaiden Group Bhd designs, produces, and maintains dependable and affordable renewable energy equipment and facilities. This vertical approach significantly reduces project costs and contributes to improved quality of life in countries

such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian nations (Samaiden Group Berhad, 2023).

Among Samaiden's notable achievements are the registration with the Sustainable Energy Development Authority Malaysia (SEDA) as a service provider, and with the Ministry of Finance Malaysia as a provider of green technology services and power generation equipment. Additionally, the company received recognition as an Electrical Contractor under the Energy Commission Malaysia in 2018 and 2019, respectively. In 2020, Samaiden was listed on the ACE Market of Bursa Malaysia Securities Bhd and successfully transferred to the Main Market by meeting the profit requirements outlined in the Securities Commission Malaysia's Equity Guidelines. From 2013 to 2023, Samaiden Group Berhad secured several Engineering, Procurement, Construction, and Commissioning (EPCC) projects valued at approximately RM 105 million (Samaiden Group Berhad, 2023).

Samaiden continues to expand its footprint in the renewable energy sector, demonstrating a strong commitment to providing sustainable energy solutions to meet the growing demand for clean energy in Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Furthermore, the company has partnered with Tokyo-based engineering firm Chudenko Corp to explore opportunities in the renewable energy market both domestically and internationally (Samaiden Group Berhad, 2023).

#### **4. Method**

This study adopts a qualitative approach by interviewing Ir Chow Pui Hee, the only female managing director of a publicly listed company in Malaysia, to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the internal and external factors contributing to the success of Ir Chow in the renewable energy industry.

#### **5. Does gender inequality matter?**

Traditionally, the field of engineering had been male dominated, as women were perceived as incapable of taking up this mentally and physically challenging profession. Hence, female enrolment in the Bachelor of Engineering was exceedingly rare in Malaysia in the 1990s. Given the hardships, Chow managed to earn a degree namely Bachelor of Engineering (Chemical) (Honors) from University Putra Malaysia in 2001. Eventually, she became the only female managing director of a publicly listed solar company in Malaysia.

Interview content: Throughout the interview, it was found that motivation, core competencies, financial resources, and support are the key determinants of female entrepreneurship.

##### **5.1. Entrepreneurial motivation**

The interviewee stated that her main motivation is to showcase her capability to excel in a business environment comparable to her peers, fueled by her sense of accomplishment.

*I was born into a poor family where my parents never had a chance to go to school. Therefore, my parents had no clue about what I had studied, yet they provided full support. Since I was young, I have always made my parents proud of my academic achievements. Besides, I am the second child at home with two brothers, and I am the only one who has enrolled in university. Moreover, in the '90s, there were not many opportunities for kids in my neighborhood to attend college or university. Honestly speaking, I am proud to say that there were two buses full of friends and relatives who attended my graduation! (Chow)*

##### **5.2. Core competencies**

According to Bird (2019), entrepreneurial competencies are fundamental qualities such as general and specialized knowledge, motivations, attributes, self-perceptions, social roles, and

abilities that lead to the establishment, continuation, and/or expansion of a business enterprise. Besides, proficiency in technical functioning necessitates that entrepreneurs adeptly utilize technology, tools, and applications within their respective specialized domains. In the interview, the respondent became an entrepreneur in the renewable energy industry, motivated by her fundamental qualities and specialized knowledge.

*When I was a young woman engineer, finding a lavatory during site visits was the largest challenge for female engineers, as the wastewater treatment plants were always situated in outlying regions, usually at the far end of the factory site. Moreover, in order to collect water samples, I had to do it under the scorching sun. Having gone through all the difficulties and challenges, after 19 years in related sectors, I decided to establish my own company. Personally, I think that most companies have the dilemma of sustaining the business. Profit margin and profit and loss accounting were always the top priorities of the business. However, environmental challenges and compliance issues historically received less attention, and the majority of people did not give much thought to the planet, despite its vital importance in maintaining life on it. That's why I will think of establishing a company that can battle environmental challenges. My company is a leading provider of solutions and services in the clean energy sector, serving the residential, commercial, and industrial industries. My company, which had just three employees in 2015, now employs 90 and is continually growing as they uphold their commitment to advancing clean energy (Chow).*

### **5.3. Financial resources and support**

According to Kungwansupaphan and Leihaothabam (2016), financial resources and support are crucial for initiating and expanding an entrepreneurial company. Women entrepreneurs face an especially dire need for financial services and information, which are consistently less accessible and available to them compared to their male counterparts. Hence, family plays a crucial role in directing young individuals towards pursuing an entrepreneurial path (Cesaroni and Paoloni, 2016), as social networks have emerged as a significant intangible asset for the advancement of their commercial endeavors (Rafiki and Nasution, 2019). Family support plays a significant role in influencing the career choices of university students, particularly in the field of business (Cardella et al. 2020). In their study, McElwee and Al-Riyami (2003) discovered that the family played a proactive and constructive role in fostering and motivating women to become entrepreneurs in Oman.

*I would not be successful without the support of my husband, Fong Yen Foon. When I decided to set up my company, my husband was the chief earner for our family, responsible for all of our children's living expenses. This freed me from financial worries and allowed me to focus on my new business. Unlike some of my female friends, who could not start a new business due to their financial burdens and family commitments, I received equal treatment from my parents, despite being the only daughter at home. Meanwhile, I also gained full support from my husband, who is currently the Executive Director of Samaiden. Beside the support from my family, I got support from my suppliers and contractors too. I have built up good connections with solar panel suppliers and contractors during my previous employment. When I started my own business, I had limited capacity to support my solar projects due to limitations in credit access. I contacted my suppliers and contractors to seek their understanding and agreement to reduce costs. Luckily, most of my clients were considerate of my new start-up and had always paid in advance to ensure my projects were completed on time. Fortunately to me, this group of people did not discriminate against me just because I am a woman. Rather, the trust and care of suppliers, contractors, and customers were the key factors in the success of my business (Chow).*

## **6. Conclusion**

While the Malaysian existing energy transition to a low-carbon and sustainable future could raise gender equality and increase women's living standards, this transformation needs to take

advantage of the vast potential and skills of women to fully accomplish the goals of social justice and inclusiveness, rather than continuing the social norm that women are underrepresented in the sector. The shift towards a gender-neutral energy system is hampered by their absence (Govindran *et al.* 2021). Through a qualitative method (interview), this case study examines the issues of gender inequality and barriers to women entering the Malaysian renewable energy sector. Taken together, in the male-dominated Malaysian renewable energy industry, although Chow has been a successful female entrepreneur and has experienced limited gender inequality issues, she highlighted a few instances of indirect gender discrimination based on her observations of employees. These discriminations may be influenced by factors such as the nature of the job in the industry, government policy, etc. Chow has also called upon the Malaysian government to reconsider the policy of 98-day maternity leave to ensure a level playing field between male and female employees, regardless of the industry they work in. This raises the question of whether the male dominance in leadership roles in the Malaysian renewable energy sector is solely caused by gender discrimination or is caused by other factors, such as job nature, female preferences for the industry, and government policies. These questions should be further explored and researched by future scholars with an interest in this field of study.

This gender inequality case study on the Malaysian renewable energy sector has global implications as follows: (1) Achieving gender equality is a universal goal, i.e., United Nations's Sustainable Development Goals Number 5, but not merely a Malaysian goal. Hence, identifying the factors of Malaysian gender inequality could provide policy implications to policymakers in the rest of the world who are striving to achieve the goal; (2) Malaysia is one of the rapidly growing countries in the group of developing countries that contribute largely to the world's GDP growth and hence sustainable economic development; and (3) the renewable energy sector is undeniably one of the sectors that could contribute to a sustainable economy in the world. As such, future study on gender equality could consider further analysis on the said aspects.

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