

TECHNOLOGY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN AND GIRLS IN 4TH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memaparkan usaha-usaha yang telah dilakukan untuk memberikan akses internet bagi gadis dan perempuan dewasa di pedesaan, tanpa melupakan adanya status quo perbebedaan literasi digital antara perempuan dan laki-laki, serta dampak yang dihasilkan dari inisiatif yang sudah diterapkan sejak 2015. Data dalam riset ini utamanya diperoleh dari dokumen resmi, publikasi penelitian, laporan lembaga terkait dan data sekunder dari statistik pemerintahan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun sudah ada beberapa usaha untuk menghadirkan akses internet bagi perempuan di wilayah pedesaan, akan tetapi rasio literasi digital antara perempuan dan laki-laki tidak berubah. Perempuan Malaysia sudah mengalami perkembangan dan upaya untuk memperjuangkan kesetaraan jender sudah berhasil. Perkembangan perempuan pedesaan memiliki arti penting untuk mengarahkan masa depan bangsa ke arah yang lebih baik.

Kata Kunci: *Perempuan Pedesaan, Revolusi Industri Keempat, Literasi Digital, Status Quo, Akses Internet*

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to present the initiatives of providing access of internet to rural women and girls while highlighting the status quo of the digital

literacy between Malaysian women and men, and the impacts of the initiatives done on digital literacy from 2015 until now. The research relies heavily on information from official documents, research publications, reports from relevant agencies, and secondary data from existing government statistics. From the information and data culled, several initiatives in providing access of internet to rural women and girls are taken by the government but the percentage of digital literacy between Malaysian women and men remains constant. Malaysian women have made significant progress and the search for greater gender equality has been relatively successful. Rural women and girls developments are essential as it will help in shaping the future of our country towards positive directions.

Keywords: Rural Women, 4th Industrial Revolution, Digital Literacy, Status Quo, Internet Access.

A. Introduction

Technology has been an important factor in human lives nowadays. In its various forms, it allows human to redefine and revolutionize the way we live and work. From the emergence of internet and ICT, it is possible for every human in this planet to search and fulfill any requirement and information in one second. Harnessing this technology to advance gender equality and women's empowerment is not only vital for women and girls, but critical throughout the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The link between technology and women's rights is clearly reflected in SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of women, which includes a specific target on utilizing technology and ICTs to realize women's and girls' empowerment. Thus, this is important

for every woman and girl to realize this opportunity and take advantage of it. ICTs are especially relevant today, as we face a rapidly changing world of work especially in terms of the right ICT and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills in order to compete on a par with boys and men in the 21st Century economy, enjoy greater choice, access better-educated and better-paid jobs. It is expected that more than 7.1 million jobs will be displaced by 2020, and for the next 30 years, half of the jobs that currently exist will have disappeared. That means that 65 per cent of the children entering primary school today could eventually work in jobs that do not currently exist yet. The 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' is one of the major contributor to this phenomenon where it brings advanced robotics, autonomous transport, AI and machine learning, all of which will have a major impact on the future labor market.

Knowing the challenges and opportunities that come along with the rapid changes and advances in technology, many initiatives have been taken and conducted by the Malaysian government especially in providing training programs, wide internet coverage, financial aids, telecenters, upgrading the facilities and more. One of the initiatives done is the establishment of telecenter. Rothschild (2008) describes telecentres as public places with access of computer and internet for the underserved population as an opportunity to access and utilize appropriate digital technologies. The development of telecentres in Malaysia began in 2000 with villages included in the exercise (Zurinah Tahir, Jalaluddin Abdul Malek & Mohd Asruladlyi Ibrahim, 2016). The initiative was pioneered by government agencies such as the Ministry of Rural and Regional Development, Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC), Ministry of Energy, Water and Communications

and various state governments (In 2016, a total of 1,945 telecentres are operational under the purview of various agencies. Telecentre projects in Malaysia are known by various names such as the Rural Internet Centre (Pusat Internet Desa, PID), Mini RTC, Kedai Com, USP Communication Centre (UCC), Rural Broadband Library, Universal Service Provision (USP), and Bestari.Com in Terengganu (ESCAP 2006). Telecentre networks play a vital role in facilitating the process of socio environmental transformation and metabolization; “the networks permit exactly the urbanization of nature and the fetishization of the commodities they carry” (Kaika and Swyngedouw, 2000). Besides that, MCMC also has provided other initiatives on communication infrastructures such as 1Malaysia People’s Cable System, Rural Broadband, Cellular Coverage Expansion dan Mobile Broadband Coverage Expansion, and 1 Malaysia Internet Centre (MCMC Annual Report, 2016). These initiatives would allow the citizens to earn easy access to internet which contributes to the development of economy in Malaysia. All of them are the part of Universal Service Provision (USP)’s initiative by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission to achieve the following objectives; firstly, to provide collective and individual access to communications in underserved areas and to underserved groups; to encourage the use of ICT to build a knowledge-based society; to contribute towards the socio-economic development of local communities and lastly, to bridge the digital divide.

Realizing the importance of gender equality’s agenda in this recent years, Malaysian government has announced 2018 as Women Empowerment Year where all women from every corner of Malaysia and also other countries from different background, age group, beliefs and ethnicity are being celebrated and empowered as a mother, sister,

partner, friend, leader and many roles. In conjunction with the purpose of establishing 2018 as Women Empowerment Year and also more years to come, former Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the government has listed four measures to elevate the role of women in the country. This includes making it compulsory by the end of 2018 for government-linked companies, government-linked investment companies and statutory bodies to ensure that at least 30 per of their boards of directors are women. The government is also proposing that the private sector increase mandatory maternity leave from the current 60 days to 90 days, as per the practice of public sector organizations. Besides that, the government has also allocated RM20 million for training and entrepreneurship programs for women, including the PEAK Entrepreneur Program under the MyWin Academy and lastly, an individual tax exemption for women who opt to return to work after a period of being out of the job market. These initiatives have shown the efforts that have been invested by Malaysian government in order to empower both rural and urban women in Malaysia. Hence, this paper discusses on the initiatives that have been implemented by Malaysia Government for the past five years in empowering rural women in terms of ICT and technology.

This paper intends to present the initiatives of providing access of internet to rural women and girls. Besides that, this paper also aims to highlight the status quo of the digital literacy between Malaysian women and men and lastly, to highlight the impacts of the initiatives done on digital literacy from 2015 until now.

This study relies heavily on secondary data from existing government statistics – census data, labour force surveys, vital statistics of the country and departmental records from government agencies and ministries, non-

governmental organization and research institutions. Information sources provided women specific data as well as ICT based-data for the construction of key indicators for the period 2015 until now. Key indicators were compiled for the status of women's ICT literacy, access to education and training and employment as well as participation in entrepreneurship. The study also used information and data culled from official documents, research publications and reports from relevant agencies.

B. Discussion

1. ICT in rural population

The adoption of information and communication technology (ICT) is among the primary agendas of the Malaysian government to raise the national economy and to transform its populace to be more technologically oriented. The rapid expansion of ICT in the process of rural development is evident both locally and globally. In line with national aspirations, the government addressed the challenge of ICT through a program in which telecentres were set up in rural communities. The cyberworld was introduced to the countryside through telecentres which offered online facilities, world exposure and learning to the rural population with the aim of narrowing the digital gap between the rural and the urban folk. The 'urbanization of the rural through telecentres' may be regarded as the development of rural areas and their residents through the adoption of ICT that brings to them similar exposure and learning opportunities as those available in the cities. Governments, especially those in developing countries, are turning to ICT not only as a strategy for bridging the digital divide between rural and urban dwellers, but also for improving the living conditions of the rural population

(Muhammad Sani Bashir et al., 2011)

The country's development program proceeded with the implementation of the National Development Policy that was launched by Y.A.B. Dato' Seri Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia on 17 June 1991. The framework of the Second Long Term Program (Rangka Rancangan Jangka Panjang Kedua, RRJP2) 1991 - 2000 was drafted and this formed the basis of the National Development Policy (Dasar Pembangunan Nasional, DPN), signaling the beginning of a new era in the drive to make Malaysia a developed country by 2020. It was continued with the 9th Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), the government initiated the MSC Net Leap program and expanded it into a network of cyber cities and centers throughout Malaysia. The sector continued its growth during the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) at an average rate of 6.8 percent per annum. Under the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016 - 2020) the government is striving to increase the ICT contribution to GDP to 17 percent from 13.1 percent during the 10th Malaysia Plan. (Malaysia Department of Statistics, 2016).

The evolution of 4IR and also National Transformation 2050 or Transformasi National (TN50) that have become the widespread sensation in Malaysia also has contributed to this matter. Generally, TN50 is an initiative to plan for the future of Malaysia in the period 2020 to 2050. From the vision of becoming a developed nation, Malaysia should strive to be amongst the top countries in the world in economic development, citizen well-being and innovation. Currently, ICT constitutes 10.5% of GDP in Malaysia, and the goal is to boost it to 17% by 2020. To ensure that growth is inclusive, Malaysia wants to improve the livelihoods of the "bottom 40%" where most of them live in rural areas. Thus, the establishment of telecentres has been part of the plan in transforming rural communities by ICT. The

development of telecentres in Malaysia began in 2000 with villages included in the exercise. In 2012, there are 2,150 telecentres set up by various Federal and State Government agencies. There are also a number of centers set up by private companies in collaboration with non-profit organizations under their corporate social responsibility programs.

In general, the telecentres are equipped with facilities, such as computers, Internet, printers, scanners, digital cameras, telephones and some with LCD projectors. The number of computers in each telecentre varies from two to twenty, depending on the size of the local community being served. These centres conduct training on the use of basic software applications as well as the use of the Internet to get information, to communicate and to do basic transactions with the government, private and financial institutions. Some telecentres also conduct training on basic computer maintenance. The daily operations of the telecentre are managed by staff appointed by the respective implementing agencies on a full time basis. Until the present time, the development of telecentres in Malaysia has involved two main phases, and another phase is scheduled to follow. In the first phase (2001-2010), telecentres were set up to address the problem of the digital gap. The second phase (2011-2015) was aimed at Bridging the Digital Divide (BDD) while the third phase (2016-2020) will focus on upgrading telecentres to make them advanced, independent, and robust in order to stand the test of time.

Telecentres develop communication systems and a social network that enable both internal communication and communication with other communities (Jalaluddin, 2012). They are digital platforms that integrate the tools and technologies of ICT, and allow for the development and planning of smart ICT (Stratigea et al., 2015). Figure 1 shows how implementation of the telecentre embodies

and enriches the social, physical, and spiritual aspects of the rural population, serving as a focal point of social engineering in the process. Telecentres further support the K-economy and development of a knowledge society.

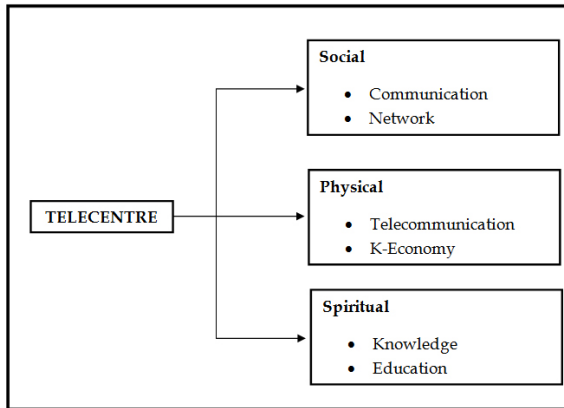


Figure 1. Telecentre as the embodiment and enrichment of social, physical, and spiritual aspects of the rural population (Jalaluddin, 2012)

Thus, through the implementation of this initiative, it also helps marginalized group such as women and girls from rural areas to enhance their knowledge in terms of ICT. According to the World Economic Forum (2013, Table 3b, pp. 12-13), Malaysia ranked extremely low (102 of the 136 countries) in the Global Gender Gap Index based on statistical data on male-female gaps in education, economic mobility, health, and participation in political roles. The claim that Malaysian women lag behind men primarily because of traditional cultural values is challenged, however, by the writings of area studies specialists and social historians about gender roles and equality in South-east Asia. One of the key tenets about South-east Asia as a region distinct from East and South Asia is the relatively high status of women. The distinguished historian Anthony Reid (1988a; 1988b, chap. 4) observed that the relative autonomy

and economic importance of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century South-east Asia probably was higher than in any other part of the world.

However, Malaysian women have benefited from increased access to education and training as indicated by the improvement in their literacy rates and net enrolment at all levels of education since 1957. The enrolment of female students at the primary level increased by more than three and a half times during the period 1957–2000. A report authored by the Penang Institute in 2016 found that the difference between female and male enrolment in public universities has increased in favour of females from 67,734 in 2009 to 86,798 in 2013. In 2016, the difference of literacy levels between men and women is 0.9 percent where the literacy level for women is 96.3% and 97.2% for men. Even women's net enrolment at all levels of education also is slightly higher than men as reported in Department of Statistics Malaysia.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is a key in the development of a country towards achieving a developed country status (Norizan, et al. 2007, Norizan et al 2009). ICT can also give a lot of opportunities especially to marginalized group to empower themselves in terms of life-long learning and getting a job and marketing their products (Norizan, et al., 2007). In order for business to grow, it is necessary to apply the use of ICT and other online platforms such as by implementing online transaction such as PayPal or other online payment gateway. (Norizan et al. 2009). In terms of the women empowerment in digital economy, Malaysia government begins to address women entrepreneurship formally in Sixth Malaysia Plan (RM6) (1991-1995). This is prior to the introduction of Dasar Wanita Negara (DWN) in 1989 which acts as a ground policy to acknowledge and recognize women as one of the key player

for national development. This policy highlights women's roles and rights to be included economically, socially and politically along with the other respective gender. This policy can be seen as a start in increasing equality and promoting inclusive economic and social growth.

2. The initiatives in providing access of internet to rural women and girls and the impacts.

There are several initiatives that have been taken by the government, NGOs and other agencies to close the digital barrier in rural areas especially. One of the initiatives is the establishment of telecentre in Malaysia. Telecentre projects in Malaysia are known by various names such as the Rural Internet Centre (Pusat Internet Desa, PID), Mini RTC, Kedai Com, USP Communication Centre (UCC), Rural Broadband Library, Universal Service Provision (USP), and Bestari.Com. Currently, there are more than 2000 telecenters in Malaysia. Telecenters is the focal point to help the government achieve its aim in transforming the country into a k-economy and a k-society country. Telecenters are equipped with facilities such as computers, access to the Internet, scanner, printer and other basic technological facilities to provide the community with access to technology in order that they become aware of the importance of technology as a tool to search for information and how it can add positive values (socially, politically and culturally) and change their lives. In addition, many program can be conducted at telecenters especially for the disabled, senior citizens, micro business owners, single mothers, youth and the poor using technology. Telecenters also function as centers to coordinate, supervise, plan and administer activities which have been planned by the government and appointed government agencies, not only in relation to ICT activities but also other activities aimed

to improve the lives of the community. One of the activities focuses on building human capital.

One of the telecenters which is 1Malaysia Internet Centre or Pusat Internet 1Malaysia (PI1M) has been established with the purpose to provide Wi-Fi access for the rural population and also to increase the socio-economic activities and standards of the low-income people and most importantly, to expose IT technology to rural dwellers on par with the towns. Currently, there are 758 PI1M all around Malaysia. Based on the MCMC's annual report for 2016, the role and contributions of PI1M have reached beyond expectations where 2,003 entrepreneurs or what we called precisely netpreneurs was born from the use of social media as the main platform in their online business since 2016. It is part of the Government's effort to narrow the digital divide among the urban and rural populations under the National Broadband Initiatives (NBI). Before, Pusat Internet 1Malaysia was known as Community Broadband Centre. They are located in rural and sub-urban areas such as Felda settlements, villages and Projek Perumahan Rakyat (PPR). Each centre is equipped with 20 computers, high-speed internet access, surfing area and training room. It caters for both abled and disabled users. The centers take an active role in conducting training programs and ICT-related events to promote interests in ICT. Various programs are designed and conducted for children, women, adults, entrepreneurs and senior citizens.

Besides that, Rural Transformation Centre (RTC), also has been established and implemented under the National Blue Ocean Strategy 4 (NBOS4) by the government of Malaysia. RTC is a site to implement some integrated initiatives for the rural communities within 100 kilometre radius of the site. According to its mandate, an RTC is supposed to improve the living conditions of people living

in rural communities around 100 kilometre radius of the centre (Ministry of Rural and Regional Development 2013). Currently, there are 9 RTCs all around Malaysia. Another initiative done which is 1 Malaysia Wireless Village also has been conducted in Malaysia. In total, 3,728 Wireless Villages were recorded by MCMC in 2017. A total of six potential benefits have been identified by Sahharon et al. (2014) for the wireless village initiative (KTW) in Malaysia for rural communities which are; i) creating connection and gaining information, ii) affordable internet services, iii) opportunities for effective communication, iv) creating a first-class mind individual, v)) economic impact at the community level and lastly, vi) exposure to online services.

In line with the facilities provided, they are not only provided a place for the community to use the internet but also a chance for them to pursue and make use of their time for beneficial activities such as getting involved with online business. In terms of the women empowerment in digital economy, Malaysia government begins to address women entrepreneurship formally in Sixth Malaysia Plan (RM6) (1991-1995). This is prior to the introduction of Dasar Wanita Negara (DWN) in 1989 which acts as a ground policy to acknowledge and recognize women as one of the key player for national development. This policy highlights women's roles and rights to be included economically, socially and politically along with the other respective gender. This policy can be seen as a start in increasing equality and promoting inclusive economic and social growth by using ICT and technology.

In encouraging rural women and girls to join and strengthen digital economy in Malaysia, a lot of initiatives has been implemented especially under The Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) where it aims to thrust Malaysia to the forefront of the Digital Economy

through the creation of Digital Hubs. The initiatives include the e-Rezeki and e-Usahawan programs that also have proven to be crucial in laying a facilitative foundation for the development of Malaysia's Digital Economy by engaging with and educating the nation's key current and future economic contributors. Until now, MDEC has trained almost 50,000 entrepreneurs in Malaysia. These programs are mostly to help rural entrepreneurs to start of their business or to anyone who wishes to be a part of the entrepreneur industrial. They will provide a proper training on how to manage a business and they even prepared some loan to start the business. The number of participants has grown significantly since the program's inception, though it did drop last year; there were 3, 108 participants in 2015, 51,303 last year and 45,697 this year (Berita Harian, 2017).

a) e-Usahawan

e-Usahawan is one of MDEC's efforts to help our beginner entrepreneur. It was launched on 23 November 2015 by our Prime Minister, YAB Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak. As he stated, the purpose of this initiative is to instill value and knowledge of digital entrepreneurship among youth and micro entrepreneurs. From this program, participants of e-Usahawan will be taught on how to utilise online marketing thus help them to expand their business across the globe. They also will be exposed on effective digital marketing, practical and also relevant to the users. Within this e-Usahawan, they were branched into two which are e-Usahawan Muda (youth) and e-Usahawan Desa (rural). E-Usahawan Muda (youth) is a collaboration between MDEC and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) which they started to include the knowledge of entrepreneurship as part of their curriculum syllabus.

For the long term effect, as expected by the government is that these entrepreneurs can make use of this platform to help them to grow their business parallel with our national digital agenda. (MDEC official website, 2015)

b) e-Rezeki

This program is based on crowdsourcing concept and its model is solely depending on services. It is to hope to be able to give benefit and help low income household yet giving them an opportunity to increase their income through this digital entrepreneurship. By joining this program they will generate extra income by doing part-time work. This task often received from international market or local company. (MDEC official website, 2015). According to our Prime Minister Najib, e-Rezeki is a measure to raise the average income and share of total income of the bottom 40% household income group, referred to as the B40s. It is also an initial approach in fostering community and social-based enterprises and building capacity for the B40 community to participate in productive and innovative economic activities such as this. MDEC has currently identified and will designate Pusat Internet 1Malaysia, community colleges and Urban and Rural Transformations Centres to become e-Rezeki's representatives.

Besides that, TEKUN also has launched a consolidated economic fund for small entrepreneurial business development. The fund aims to provide financial and wide ranging business support services to low-income and vulnerable population in Malaysia. It also caters to the needs of university educated young entrepreneurs. One of the unique features of the consolidated economic fund for small entrepreneurial business development is that it seeks to provide equal opportunities to all Malaysian

to be successful entrepreneurs. Since 1998, Tekun has through its schemes channelled RM4.72 billion to some 388,233 entrepreneurs in the country. During the tabling of 2018 Budget last year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said the RM500 million is allocated to assist small-scale entrepreneurs to develop their businesses, and is the largest allocation that was given to the finance provider agency since its establishment in 1998. It shown how the government has invested in helping local entrepreneurs especially women and girls in growing the business.

DanaNITA is another effort by MARA to help women who want to start or expand their business by providing them personal loans which started since on 2017. The target for this scheme is national women within the range if age from 18 to 60 years old who have legal business license. In this year Budget 2018, they have allocated RM50 million for this scheme. Approximately RM5 million is allocated to provide motivational training and the preparation of business plans to over 5,000 new women entrepreneurs. They will be given maximum amount of RM 50,000 each to expand their business with the expectation of 4% profit from the whole year sales. Many women micro entrepreneur find this scheme is helpful for them to expand their business since the technique of payment of the loan does not burden them. This is a good opportunity for all women entrepreneur to grab this chance and it is parallel with our Women Empowerment 2018 objective which is to create more leaders among women and be a part of the board members.

Tunas Usahawan Belia Bumiputera (TUBE) is another government initiative to encourage youth to be a part of this entrepreneurship world. It has started since 2014 and it has benefited approximately 1436 youth entrepreneur across the country. They targeted another 1000 participants to join in this year. According to the Minister of International

Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed, the amount of profit value recorded is RM 2.8 million and 405 job opportunities are offered (Berita Harian, October 2017). The purpose of this program is to instill the value and interest of entrepreneurship among youth and to encourage them to create their own job opportunities by creating their own business line. Through the implementation of these programs, the number of registered online women entrepreneurs has increased to 19,073 women nationwide as of March 2017. The increased number of women participation in online business is due to the extensive efforts that have been invested by the ministry that work closely with e-commerce centres, various agencies and Companies Commission of Malaysia (SSM) (Datuk Paduka Chew Mei Fun, 2017).

Since 2017, Malaysia has launched the world's first Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ). DFTZ will provide physical and virtual zones to facilitate SMEs to capitalise on the convergence of exponential growth of the internet economy and cross-border e-Commerce activities. It will act as a microcosm to support internet companies to trade goods, provide services, innovate and co-create solutions. DFTZ has the potential to double the growth rate of Malaysian SMEs' goods export by 2025. It is also estimated to support US\$65 billion worth of goods moving through DFTZ. Additionally, DFTZ is expected to create 60,000 direct and indirect jobs by 2025. It shows how Malaysian women and girls are progressing from year to years. Those who are not able to graduate from their tertiary education, they are still have a chance to pursue their study in any area and field that they are interested through life-long learning education. In addition, the advance of technology and financial aids from the government, agencies and NGOs have open a new door for women and girls especially who are coming from rural areas to groom and empower themselves with knowledge,

skills and experience. Even though, they women who have managed to escape poverty and own their own business, they will continue to be given guidance and a certificate to qualify as entrepreneurs legally. Hence, these programs are not only made to generate their income but also to enhance and increase their level of literacy on technology and other skills.

3. The status quo of the digital literacy between Malaysian women and men

Since 2016, broadband penetration rate per 100 households has grown steadily from 2011 to 2016, reaching 81.5% in 2016. Household broadband subscriptions increased by 11.6% to 6.2 million in 2016 from 5.5 million in 2015, contributed by substantial increase in postpaid mobile broadband segment. It shows that the implementation of various initiatives in enhancing the use of internet and ICT has contributed to this progression. As for women’s digital literacy level in Malaysia, it can be seen from the rate of the use of internet and ICT where according to the statistics provided by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission as shown by Table 2 below, the percentage of female internet users has fluctuated as from 2014 until 2016, however, the percentage has increased from 40.6% in 2015 to 42.6% in 2016. However, the male internet users also show the same pattern but it eventually dropped from 59.4% in 2015 to 57.4% in 2016 compared to female users.

PERCENTAGE OF INTERNET USERS BY GENDER (%)

Tahun <i>Year</i>	Lelaki <i>Male</i>	Perempuan <i>Female</i>
2014	58.3	41.7
2015	59.4	40.6
2016	57.4	42.6

Table 2 *Percentage of Internet Users by Gender (%)*

As for Table 3 below, the percentage of hand phone users by gender has shown different result as the percentage of male hand phone users is higher than the percentage of female hand phone users even though both of their percentages are decreased starting from 2015 to 2016.

PERCENTAGE OF HAND PHONE USERS BY GENDER (%)

Tahun <i>Year</i>	Lelaki <i>Male</i>	Perempuan <i>Female</i>
2014	56.9	43.1
2015	56.9	43.1
2016	57.0	43.0

Table 3 *Percentage of Hand Phone Users by Gender (%)*

However, in general, ICT services sector continued its growth during the 10th Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) at an average rate of 6.8 percent per annum. Under the 11th Malaysia Plan (2016 - 2020) the government is striving to increase the ICT contribution to GDP to 17 percent from 13.1 percent. As for the e-commerce, the contribution to GDP was 5.9%, or RM68.3bil in 2015, before increasing to 6.1%, or RM74.6bil, in 2016. Hence, it shows the e-commerce and ICT contributions in our country is doing great due to the advancement and tremendous initiatives on ICT that have been implemented in order to grow our economy and country. In conjunction with this development, women and girls in Malaysia also has shown their progressive development in terms of the use of technology and ICT as well over years. There is no much difference between both male and female in terms of this matter.

Rural women and girls development is very essential as it will help to shape the future of our country towards more positive direction. Indirectly, it will impact towards the development of rural communities where if they can make use of every chance and development that we have

nowadays especially in terms of ICT and technology, economic and social advancement of the local community would be more prominent and progressive. In general, Malaysian women have made significant progress since Malaysia gained independence in 1957. The progress is perceptible and near universal with more Malaysian women in both absolute and relative terms being involved in all key socio-economic areas than before: in education, in health, in the economy, and in power-sharing and decision-making. The quest for greater gender equality has been relatively successful, although improvements can still be made in certain sectors. Looking at the progression of rural women and girls in Malaysia, the use of ICT and technology has been their remedy to involve, explore and enhance their products and services into the next level. ICT can also bridge the gap between rural communities and urban communities, also known as the digital divide.

The Government's commitment to improve the status of women has intensified over time. Mainstreaming gender into social and economic development plans is a continuous process to be undertaken by line ministries and state agencies by implementing women specific programs and projects. Even so, Malaysia is an example of a country which has since gaining independence, made great progress in improving the quality of life and status of women, particularly in providing them with ever-increasing opportunities to become stakeholders in the country's economic development. Hence, in celebrating 2018 as Women Empowerment Year, it is important for every women and girls to take this opportunity to embrace themselves and pursue their goals in life. Together with the efforts and government's commitments, it will help to empower women and give them a greater role not only in society but also in nation building.

C. Conclusion

The emergence of social media as the communication tools have been used wisely as they use this opportunity to market their local products and services that are rarely can be offered in suburban areas and at the same time, they can learn and enhance their ideas, skills and knowledge on certain matter that cannot be reached offline. At the same time, tremendous opportunities and initiatives provided by the government, NGOs and various agencies have given them a chance to fully utilize it for example, the establishment of telecentre has been an alternative for those who are living in the rural areas to get access to internet and technological facilities provided without spending a lot of money and time. It also provides opportunities and facilities relevant to the management of the economy, improvement of academic performance, and the handling of daily chores of residents in rural communities. The ultimate goal of telecentres is to mould a society competent in SMART ICT. Besides that, the trainings and courses offered through these facilities and other programs can help rural women and girls to enhance their skills and support life-long learning. In this regard, it is vital to ensure that there is co-operation from all concerned parties such as the government, private sector, statutory bodies, non-governmental bodies and local residents.

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