

Women employees: The work force and career progress

Rusli Ahmad, David Chin Teck Siang & Sopian Bujang
Department of Human Resource Development
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
+6082 581561
Fax: +6082581567
arusli@fcs.unimas.my
bsopian@fcs.unimas.my

Brief biographical note

Full name: Rusli Ahmad*
Address: Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
Contact: University Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia.

Full name: David Chin Teck Siang
Address: Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
Contact: University Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia.

Full name: Sopian bin Bujang
Address: Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
Contact: University Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan
Sarawak, Malaysia.

Key: * Correspondent author

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This research wants to determine the relationship between challenges faced by women employees in work force and perception towards their career progress. Questionnaires with five-point Likert scale were used as an instrument in this study. A total number of 100 set of questionnaires were distributed. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 12.0. Descriptive statistic (frequency and percentage) were used to explain the demographic characteristics of respondents. There are three hypotheses and all hypotheses were measured using Pearson Product Moment correlation Coefficient. The findings shows that there is significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) of gender bias in workplace and culture norms with perception towards career progress but no significant relationship between education background and perception toward their career progress. Through this research it is obvious that challenges such as gender bias in workplace and culture norms in today society will influence the perception of women employees toward their career progress. The implication of this study is that human resource practitioner could develop an action plan to boost women career development and thus improve economy of the country. Future researcher can use qualitative studies to identify factors affecting women career development that cannot be measured using quantitative approaches.

Key words: career progress, women employees, work force

1. Introduction

This research focused on the challenges faced by women in labor force and its implication on the women career development. According to statistic carried out by Department of Statistics in Malaysia, women represent 36% of the workforce (Women's Equality in Malaysia, 2001). However, half of the percentages comprised of women who are unpaid or working as housewife. Although there is increasing trends of women entering labor force, the majority of women in labor force still engaged in low and middle level jobs. While there is more women involved in professional jobs, most of them are restricted to nursing and teaching professions (Women's Equality in Malaysia, 2001).

The participation of women in labor force has increased since 1970. Although Malaysia is still developing countries, its female labor participation in workforce is comparable to developed countries in Asia and Pacific. Women comprised of 43.3 % of the

workforce in manufacturing sector. But majority of women in Malaysia still involved in low-skilled, labor intensive jobs in agriculture and semi skilled work such as assembly work in factory (Aminah Ahmad, 1998). In 1980, women employers comprised of 7% in labor force in Malaysia economy. By 1990, the number of female employers reached only merely 8.5%. Ironically, women still outnumbered men in term of unpaid work, 64% of women compared to 35% men in 1990. Women still earn lower salary than their male counterparts in private sector (Women's Equality in Malaysia, 2001).

There are numbers of factors that contribute to the increase of number of women in labor force. The growth in manufacturing and services sectors where most of the employees are females contribute to the increase of women in labor force. The manufacturing sector has been experiencing highest growth rate during the last decade and created at least 0.6 million new jobs between 1990 and 1994 and during 1994, at least 1.9 million people are employed in manufacturing sector. The rapid growth of manufacturing sector has led to the mobilization of female labor and increase in employment with about 46.4 % in 1990 and 43.4% in 1995 which consist of women. Women account for 60% of total labor force in financial and government sector while agriculture sector is no longer dominated by women employees and the number of women employees in agriculture sector has declined as well from 40% in 1970 to 30% percent in 1995. The reason for the decline in agriculture sector is that Malaysian women is able to move into better paying opportunities in other sector (Aminah Ahmad, 1998).

2. Problem Statement

Women has been neglected the opportunity to build career and achieve success in the labor force for a long time. The organizations ignore the women workforce as productive and

innovative input to the organizational success. There are some factors that have been hindering the development of women as part of a formal work life. But now at a gradually slow rate-changing trend, things are moving toward recognizing women as useful human resources and effective as men in managing the organization through a comparative market (Sabeen, 2007).

The reason for gender taken into account by organization is the equality issue by the human rights commission and Non Government Organisation (NGO) forced the employers to provide equal opportunity for both men and women in order to fulfill legal and ethical requirements in labor force. Another factor is the efficiency and value addition of women in the organizational practices and thus develops the advantage of a diverse workforce. Women are proven to be a valuable resources and asset for the organization with their abilities such as multi tasking skills which the men lack (Standing, 2000).

Studies concluded that the women have the personality traits, skills, qualification and motivation to work especially in the role of leader. In fact women are able to focus on achieving the goal that they committed to (Liff & Ward, 2001). Another study conclude that women can handle stress and work in under extreme pressure conditions but not as effective compared to men and women are more prone to stress related illness because they have to face stress at home and work (Davidson & Cooper, 1992).

Study in term of behavioral aspect (Elron & Kark, 2002) showed that women have personality dimension that help them to socialize and interact effectively with other people. Their communication styles tend to be empathetic that help to improve work relationship by enhancing the others' self worth. Although it is considered as advantage for women, it could become negative factor where people will take advantage of their empathy abilities and will not respect or regard women as fellow worker or boss but as women (Standing, 2000).

In the developing countries, the biggest challenges faced by women are that the social perception that perceive women as not capable and meant for formal work. The existence of female oriented jobs and the impact of socialization discourage women to participate in the occupation that is not female oriented (Myerson & Fletcher, 2000). The biggest obstacles that women face in labor force are the family responsibilities where at certain point in their life, women will have to abandon their career to take roles as fulltime housewife (Sabeen, 2007). Thus they could not devote all of the time to focus on developing their career. Others than that, women tends to take more leave during their employment period because they are prone to marriage and childbirth. Thus they have longer period to develop their career. Most of the companies do not favor women to take breaks from work, maintain their progress during their absence, welcome them back from breaks and reassess their training needs. Thus, they are left behind in career progression compared to men (Bourgon, 1996).

Other challenges that women face in workplace is the gender discrimination and stereotyping. Most employers perceive that women as poor managers, less motivated and less careers oriented (Sabeen, 2007).

In the era of globalization, the distinction among people, different nations, races and sexes are diminishing. The existence of any business or economy not only depends on the optimal utilization of current available resources but also on innovation and diversity. Organizations that accept the entrance of women employees increase the pool of talented applicants leading the organization to acquire and retain competitive workforce (Sparrow, Schuler & Jackson, 2002). In order to increase efficiency and competitive edge in this era of globalization, employers must learn how to optimize the usage of women employees (Sabeen, 2007).

There have been few researches conducted on challenges of women in workforce and impact on the women career development in public organization in Malaysia but did not explore the other factor that could impact the career development of women employees in Malaysia. Thus it is important to carry out this study to examine the impact of challenges faced by women employees in workforce that affect their career development so that employers could develop the potential of women employees and increase workforce competitiveness and efficiency.

3. Previous Study on Barriers to Career Progression Faced by Women Employees

Study by Maimunah Ismail and Mariani Ibrahim (2007) has found that working while taking charge of family responsibility is considered to be the significant barrier for women in workforce. Women have difficulty managing time for work and family because of high workload. Other than that, it is found that women are struggling to gain credibility and respectability from the supervisors and managers. The major reason for women to resign and abandon their career was family responsibility followed by work life balance and relocation of family. It is also found that women have the desire to climb the organization hierarchy but that their organization does not have policy that encourage and provide support for women to achieve their target. Majority of women still not sure about the existence of companies in Malaysia that support and value women in management positions.

This study also found family responsibilities reduce women commitment to their career because they had less time to build their career. The study also reveals the need of changing the family structure to allow women to focus on their work and build their career. It is found that husband roles in supporting women are crucial in for their career success. Besides that, it appears that women do give priority for their roles on handling family matters

and they will not put aside their family responsibilities. The study also found that women do not want to sacrifice their feminism characteristics to be successful in their career indicating that women still have opportunity to progress in workplace without sacrificing their womanhood.

Other than that, study have found that the societal pressure are getting lesser and lesser as women break free from the traditional norms that conform to the traditional role of women. It is evident that women are still subjected to gender discrimination where they received lower salary compared to men. Men are evaluated favorably compared to women and result in higher reward although the performance of the men are same with the women. This indicates society still perceive women as lower status and not deserve getting what they should get.

This study revealed that organization cultures do impact their career progress. This is because some organization are very male oriented and women have to compete on men's terms and their needs as a woman are not addressed by that particular organization. Women have to struggle to prove that they can perform on par with men. This study also revealed that work life balanced policy was not implemented effectively because of high workload and organization expectation. It is found that women prefer to have flexi-working options with tele-working and working from home and part time working options. Younger and married female staffs prefer childcare facilities and extended maternity leave.

4. Research Objectives

This study wants to identify the relationship between challenges faced by women employees in workforce and their career development. Several specific objectives are identified as below;

- (a) To investigate the relationship between gender bias faced by women in workplace and career development of women.
- (b) To investigate the relationship between culture norms and career development of women.
- (c) To investigate the relationship between education backgrounds and career development of women.

There are three hypotheses in this study and is listed below:

Ha1: There is significant relationship between gender bias faced by women in workplace and perception toward their career progress.

Ha2: There is significant relationship between culture norms and perception toward their career progress.

Ha3: There is significant relationship between education background and perception toward their career progress.

5. Data Collection and Analysis

Correlation study was used in this research. According to Cohen and Cohen (1968), correlational study is the study of association between independent variables and dependent variables. It also allows the researcher to predict the cause and effect of relationship. Other than that, correlations study also aim to predict the relationship. Data collection was conducted using survey questionnaires and is distributed to all women employees in all departments in one private telecommunication company. In the context of this research, the independent variables are gender bias, education and culture while the dependent variable is the career development of women employees.

In the context of this study, the population consists of all women employees in one public services sector located in Kuching, Sarawak. The total population of women employees is currently 250 employees in all departments. The formula for calculating the sample size is shown below:

$$S_0 = \frac{Z^2 \times (p)(q)}{e^2} \qquad S = \frac{S_0}{1 + (S_0/N)}$$

Referring to the calculation above, the minimum numbers of respondents are 52. Respondents are chosen using stratified random sampling techniques and was based on the gender factor. 20 respondents are selected from the five department involves. A total number of 100 questionnaires were distributed and after two weeks, 86 questionnaires were returned and used for further data analysis.

The reliability and validity of the questionnaires were tested using Alpha's Coefficient and suggestion from Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) about the good alpha's value was used in this study (at least 0.70). In this study a series of parametric test was conducted and as in Table 1.

Table 1 Parametric Test Results

Measure	Items	Alpha	KMO	Bartlett's Test	Eigenvalue	Variance Explained (%)
Gender bias Workplace	8	0.763	0.773 p=0.000	173.399	5.113	63.907
Culture Norms	8	0.832	0.673 P=0.000	237.699	4.783	59.784

Education Background	7	0.958	0.755	254.048	5.669	80.981
			P=0.000			
Perception towards Career Progress	14	0.893	0.721	311.436	6.165	44.038
			P=0.000			

6. Respondents' Background

There were 86 respondents who participated in this research. The highest percentage was group age of 31-35 with 27.9% (n=24) and the lowest percentage was group 36-40 with 9.4% (n=8). For the marital status distribution, all respondents are categorized into two categories according to their marital status. From the table above, majority of the respondents are in married category while the rest of respondents are in unmarried category. For the education background distribution, the respondents are categorized based on their highest education level attained. The highest percentage was under Malaysia Certificate of Education/ Matriculation group with 33.7 % (n=29) and the lowest percentage was Diploma group with 8.1 % (n=7).

7. Research Finding and Discussion

The research finding and discussion was reported base on the research objectives in this study.

7.1 To determine the relationship between gender bias in workplace and perception toward career progress

To answer the above research objective, Ha1 below was tested and Table 2 shows the results of the hypothesis testing.

Ha1: There is significant relationship between gender bias in workplace and perception towards their career progress

Table 2 Correlation Result of the Gender Bias in Workplace

		Gender Bias	Career Progress
Gender Bias	:Pearson Correlation (r)	1	.714**
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.	.000
	N	86	86
Career Progress	: Pearson Correlation (r)	.714**	1
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.000	.
	N	86	86

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1 tailed)

From the table above, the r-value is equal to 0.714 and the significant value, P-value is equal to 0.000. Since the significant value which is P-value is less than significant level at 0.01 (1 tailed), therefore there is significant relationship between gender biases in workplace and perception towards career progress. Thus, the hypothesis is accepted. This finding parallel with reports from consulting firm owner. They found that client does not prefer women consultant compared to men, women were given limited choice of tasks and have difficulty in establishing agreement with client which could improve their career progress. Rational bias exist in organization where the business people are perceive to prefer one gender than the other and employees in human resources in charge of decision making are pressured to adapt to the organization culture that practice discrimination (Dexter, 1985, Larwood, Szwajkowski & Rose 1984). Rational bias theory suggest that decision maker that emphasized on his or her own interest will do decision that will enhance his or her career position.

Study by Maimunah Ismail and Mariani Ibrahim (2007) stated that it is evident that women are still subjected to gender discrimination where they received lower salary compared to men. Men are evaluated favorably compared to women and result in higher

reward although the job performance of the men are same with the women. This indicates that society still perceive women as lower status and not deserve getting what they should get. Other than that, it is found that women are struggling to gain credibility and respectability from the supervisors and managers. Women have the desire to climb the organization hierarchy but that their organization does not have policy that encourage and provide support for women to achieve their target.

7.2 To determine the relationship between culture norms and perception toward career progress

The hypothesis Ha2 was tested using Pearson Correlation and the result of the test is shown in table below.

Ha2: There is significant relationship between culture norms and perception towards career progress

Table 3 Correlation Result of the Culture Norms

		Culture Norms	Career Progress
Culture Norms	:Pearson Correlation (r)	1	.288**
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.	.004
	N	86	86
Career Progress	: Pearson Correlation (r)	.288**	1
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.004	.
	N	86	86

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

From the table above, there is significant relationship between culture norms and perception towards career progress. The Pearson Correlation analysis shows that the r-value is equal to 0.288 and the P-value is equal to 0.004 which is less than the significant level of 0.01 (1-tailed). Thus, Ha2 is accepted. Study from WAO (Women Action Organization)

stated that formulation, interpretation and implementation of laws contribute to the discrimination of women roles in society. In Malaysia, family institutions are perceived to be important culture of Malaysians. Malaysians culture place heavy emphasize on the role of women as wife and mother and discouraged them to work. Konrad and Linehann (1999) stated that gender role also play a factor that influence the choice of work and career development. Maimunah Ismail (2002) stated that inappropriate behavior and role conflict can be stressful and become barrier to women in work. Many women have to abandon their work and career after getting married (Women's Equality in Malaysia, 2001).

Study by Maimunah Ismail and Mariani Ibrahim (2007) has found that working while taking charge of family responsibility is considered to be the significant barrier for women in workforce. Women have difficulty managing time for work and family because of high workload. It is also evident in this study that family responsibilities reduce women commitment to their career because they had less time to build their career. The study also reveals the need of changing the family structure to allow women to focus on their work and build their career. It is found that husband roles in supporting women are crucial for their career success. Besides that, it appears that women do give priority for their roles on handling family matters and they will not put aside their family responsibilities just to focus on their career.

7.3 To determine the relationship between education backgrounds and perception toward career progress

The hypothesis Ha3 is tested using Pearson Correlation and the result of the test is shown in the table below.

Ha3: There is significant relationship between education backgrounds and the perception toward career progress

Table 4 Correlation Result of the Education Backgrounds

		Education Background	Career Progress
Education Background	:Pearson Correlation (r)	1	-.144
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.	.148
	N	86	86
Career Progress	: Pearson Correlation (r)	-.144	1
	:Sig (1-tailed)	.148	.
	N	86	86

In the Table 4, the Pearson Correlation analysis shows that there is no significant relationship between education background and perception towards career progress. The table shows that the r-value is equal to -0.144 and the significant value (P-value) is equal to 0.144 which is more than 0.01 of significant level (1-tailed). Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Eisenmann (1998 in Horany, 2002) stated that during mid 18th century, the society expects women to adopt the ideal feminine roles which require them to be “pure, pious, domestic and submissive”. The feminine ideals do not necessarily achieved through education and receiving education during Victorian Period were considered as an “act of nonconformity”. Society perceived that education will cause women discontented with their current status and irritation with men and that education will disrupt the social balance during that time. Horany (2002) stated that one main factor that prevent women gain access to education because men fear that social system would break down if women are entitled access to education. They worry that women will stop fulfilling their traditional feminine roles if they received higher education. That why society rules and laws that prohibits women from getting education is created. But this is idea is irrelevant in twentieth century because

there is no such laws that prohibits women to gain education. Instead, many laws that protect women rights are created and it is illegal to discriminate women by denying their access to education. There are many women associations and clubs that protect the rights of women such as WAO.

Study by Maimunah Ismail and Mariani Ibrahim (2007) found that societal pressure are getting lesser and lesser as women break free from the traditional norms that conform to the traditional role of women. Men and women have equal rights and chance for education and jobs in this era of globalization and gender differences are no longer taken into account as the diversity in workforce and education are increasing which means the number of women in education and workforce are increasing from day to day.

8. Research Implication and limitation

According to this study, there are increasing number of women in the workforce and they has become the important asset for organization to survive in this globalization era where the boundaries of gender is diminishing and the workforce today become more diverse. There are many employees consisting of different gender, nationality and religion in today workforce and thus organization must know how to manage the differences in order to have competitive and high quality workforce.

In practice, Human Resource Manager must know what the needs of women are and develop policy that fulfill their needs so that women employees are motivated and can focus on their work and perform well. This in turn will enhance their career development because the organization could see the potential within them and will give promotions opportunity for them.

Women have been proven to possess additional advantage which men don't have that is the ability to do multitask (Standing, 2000) and build rapport with people (Enron & Kark, 2002). This ability can be a useful asset for organizations that specialized in consultation or customer services where employees will have to face and communicate with client every day. When women employees can perform well in their jobs, organization will reap the benefits and gain competitive edge in the long run.

This study only focused on one private organization only. Other than that, the number of respondent is limited and does not cover the whole population of other women employees in other country. The time to conduct this study is also very limited. Therefore the result of this study need to be re-examine before can be generalized to other country and organizations. Likert scale questionnaires are used and distributed to employees of Human Resources Department.

9. Recommendations

No body denied the important contribution made by the women employees at the work place. Their contribution is important for the national economic growth and the nation building. This study helps to improves existing theory such as feminism theory and rational bias theory which describes the issues faced by women employees in labor force and try to fill in the gap in the current theory that describes how the challenges faced by women employees in labor force affect their career development. The result from this study can be used as a guide by human resource manager to identify the factors that hinders career development of women employees. Human Resource Manager can use the result of this study as a guideline to help them to develop a plan to overcome barriers in women career development. Thus human resources manager will be able to optimize the potential of women employees that will help

organization to increase competitiveness and to survive in globalization era. The results of this study will greatly help to improve the management of human resource as the important asset of organization in because women employees are proven to be the key to competitive edge in the era of globalization. Human resources manager can know which factor affect and which factor does not affect much the women employees' career development and design effective career program to boost women career development.

In the future, researcher can conduct the study related to women career development using qualitative method to get more accurate data because some factor that influence the career development of women cannot be measured. Besides that, researchers can also try to conduct deeper study on specific factors that affect women employees' career development. This can help to identify which factors exert the bigger influence on the career development of women employees and provide action plan to minimize or eliminate the factor. The specific factors that affect women employees' career development can become independent variables for the practitioners' research. In addition, researcher can conduct research at both private and public sectors and do comparison between both respondents' perception from private and public sector as they might have different perception towards their career progress.

10. Conclusion

This study is mainly focused on the challenges faced by women employees in workforce and the impact on their career development. By considering the 'p' value and 'r' value of each of the relationship, this study indicated that there is a significant relationship between gender bias in workplace and culture norms with perception towards career progress. Therefore, the findings suggested that two types of challenges faced by women employees in workforce that

is gender bias in workplace and culture norms do affect their perception towards career progress. Thus, organization should develop action plan to minimize or eliminate gender bias element in workplace to ensure fair and healthy working environment for both men and women employees.

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Structured Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between challenges faced by women employees in work force and perception towards their career progress.

Design/methodology/approach - Questionnaires with five-point likert scale were used as an instrument in this study. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 12.0. Descriptive statistic such as frequency and percentage were used to explain the demographic characteristics of respondents. There are three hypotheses in this study. These hypotheses were measured using Pearson Product Moment correlation Coefficient statistical analysis. A total number of 100 set of questionnaires were distributed to chosen sample size in public sector.

Findings –Research limitation/ implication - Pearson Product Moment correlation Coefficient shows that there is significant relationship ($p < 0.05$) of gender bias in workplace and culture norms with perception towards career progress but no significant relationship between education background and perception toward their career progress. Through this research it is obvious that challenges such as gender bias in workplace and culture norms in today society will influence the perception of women employees toward their career progress. Future researcher can use qualitative studies to identify factors affecting women career development that cannot be measured using quantitative approaches.

Originality/value - Through this research it is obvious that challenges such as gender bias in workplace and culture norms in today society will influence the perception of women employees toward their career progress. The implication of this study is that human resource practitioner could develop an action plan to boost women career development and thus improve economy of the country.