WHY ARE THERE SO FEW WOMEN IN TOP MANAGEMENT POSITIONS? A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN WOMEN IN THE CORPORATE SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study is to identify several reasons why there are so few women in top management positions. The study involved 53 male and female working in the corporate sector in Kuala Lumpur.

The research findings revealed that male managers are better than female managers in terms of performance. The results showed male managers are most outstanding in "solving problems and make decisions," "managing change," and "contributing to organizational stability." Female managers, on the other hand, are only effective in "getting the day's work done." This partly explains why most people prefer to work with male bosses than female bosses. Besides the fact that male managers are better at solving problems, male managers are also preferred because they are "less emotional" and "more flexible" with co-workers.

Another reason cited for the lack of women in top management is women's lack of motivation and commitment at work. However, the results of this study proved otherwise. Women do have the same motivations towards work as men. There is no significant evidence to prove that men and women are motivated by different factors at work. Nevertheless, it is argued that although women may have the same ambitions as men, practical difficulties explain why some do not translate these into action. Many hurdles have to be overcome before women can successfully compete with men in leadership positions.

As the country enters the new millenium, societal perceptions towards women should change to create more opportunities for women. Organizations need to develop the attitudes and expertise to make effective use of female managers and professionals for the betterment of the country. At the same time, women themselves need to revise their own views and strategies of what lead to successful achievement in the work place.

APPROVAL PAGE

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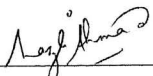
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3

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project paper is a result of my own study, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by reference note and a bibliography is appended.

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For all working women…

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Women everywhere in the world face barriers in penetrating the upper levels of management. Over the years, extensive research had been done on this issue, particularly in the West. During the 70's and early 80's, most researchers were concerned with descriptive data: What jobs did women actually have? Why women choose such occupations? Was there a connection between low-salaried jobs and women's traditional housework? Eventually, the focus of research turned towards leadership behavior. Leadership styles and communication styles between male superiors and female subordinates were evaluated, and many researchers found that this communication was not always effective, explaining why women failed to climb the hierarchical ladder (Asplund, 1988).

In Malaysia, studies with specific focus on women have slowly emerged within the last two decades. At the early stages, these studies were mainly focused on family planning, nutrition and health. Later, studies on women factory workers and rural labor force were highlighted. However, studies on women in management have been minimal to date. This could be due to, firstly, the lack of women in the management arena, and secondly, the difficulty of obtaining reliable statistics on the number of women managers in this country. However, this is becoming an important issue particularly with the increasing number of women in the workforce. As the country gears up to become a developed nation by the year 2020, more women are demanding equal rights at the work

place. As much as we want to see women receiving the same opportunities as men, women are facing numerous obstacles when it comes to career advancement.

1.1   Statement of Problem

Malaysian women have significantly lagged behind their male counterparts in securing managerial positions in the work place. Tan (1991) in her study on *Women Managers in Peninsular Malaysia* in the 1980s, revealed that there was virtually no woman at top management within all job classifications and men significantly outnumbered women at middle management. The study also revealed that women were mostly confined to clerical, administrative, manual jobs, and non-managerial positions. The situation is slightly better in the West although not that remarkable. In 1970, approximately 19.5% (or one in every six) of managers in the USA were women. By 1990, this percentage has risen to 25 to 50 percent in some major companies. Nevertheless, American women still occupied less than 5% of top manager's jobs because most of the growth has been at the lower levels of management (Lussier, 1996).

Women in general, have been discouraged from pursuing serious careers because of the old beliefs that women are less committed to their jobs and women will have dual-career problems if they carry on with their professional life. The traditional belief that a woman's place is at home also contributes to the lack of women in top management.

The rapid economic development in the 90's has certainly brought about changes in the Malaysian corporate scene. The economic boom created an urgent need for women

to fill-up employment positions in the corporate sector. Equipped with good educational background, knowledge and skills, these women competed in the corporate world that has constantly been dominated by men. Indeed, the number of women managers has increased in recent years compared with what it was ten or twenty years ago. However, the rate at which they are gaining access to the boardroom is not as fast as their male counterparts. Why is that so?

1.2   Research Objective

The objective of this research is to determine why there are so few women in top management positions in Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following question:

1.2.1   Why are there so few women in top management positions? Is it because women are not manager-material, or is it because people simply prefer men as leaders?

To answer the research objective, the researcher has proposed four reasons for the slow progress of women in managerial field. These are:

(i)   Men make better managers than women

(ii)   People prefer male bosses

(iii)   Women do not have the same career goals, as do men.

(iv)   Women face more challenges at work

(v)   Negative perception towards women

The conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Conceptual Framework

"Why Women Don't Make It to the Top?"
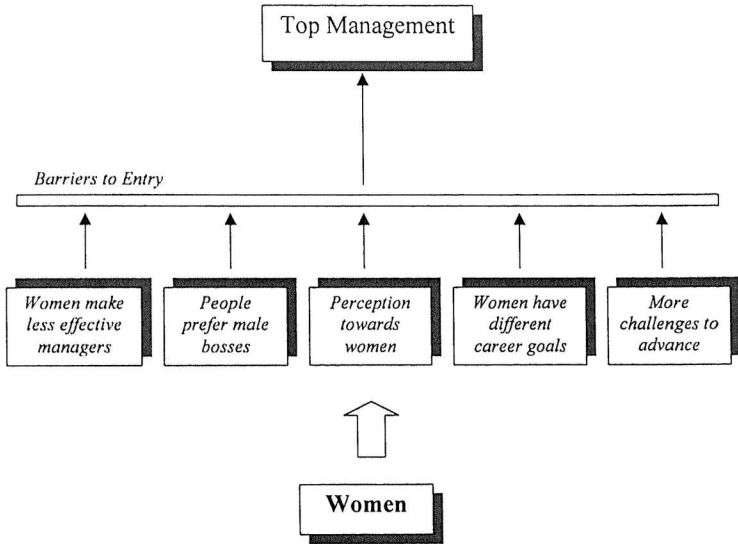
1.3 Hypothesis Statements

To achieve the objective of the study, several hypotheses are developed. Table 1.2 summarizes the null hypotheses and the related studies.

Table 1.2

Summary of Null Hypotheses and Related Studies

	Null Hypothesis Statements	Previous Studies
Ho (1)	There is no difference in performance between male and female managers	Marshall (1984), Ferber & Spitze (1979), Bartol (1978)
Ho (2)	There is no preference for male or female bosses	Moss & Jesrund (1995)
Ho (3)	There is no difference in work motivations between men and women	Brief and Oliver (1976)
Ho (4)	There is no difference in challenges in gaining access to top management positions for men and women	None
Ho (5)	There is no difference in perception towards women.	Lussier (1996), Bileby & Bielby (1988)

1.4 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The barriers to entry for women in management are wide ranging. They vary from personal factors to external factors and are rather complex to analyze. It is impossible to examine all the barriers to entry within the scope of this paper. As such, only the five factors mentioned earlier are examined in this study.

Participants in this study are confined to the working population in Kuala Lumpur. They include only those working in the private sector and exclude those in the public

sector. Hence, the research findings are limited to this set of population only, and the results should not be generalized for the whole population of Malaysia.

1.5   Significance of the Study

The results from this study will provide an insight into women's status in the work place. It will unveil the reasons behind women's slow progress in leadership positions, and determine the challenges facing the working women of today.

The information obtained will have important implications in enhancing women's rights as well as serve as a basis to increase women's participation in management position. As Malaysia enters the new millenium and strives to reach its developed status by the year 2020, there is a pressing need for competent leaders and managers to transform that vision into reality. However, as management experts are generally lacking among Malaysians, a look towards women as suitable management candidate may provide a solution to this predicament.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Different Leadership Styles between Male and Female

The perennial questions that continue to guide research that compares men and women managers are "Do women manage differently?" and "Are women's leadership styles different from men's?" These are the most common questions that researchers seek to find answers to when comparing men and women managers.

Previous studies argued that early socialization process has given women values and characteristics that result in leadership behaviors that are different from the traditionally aggressive, competitive, and controlling leadership behaviors of men (Moss & Jensrud, 1995; Helgesin, 1990; Rosener, 1989). Authors such as these contend that women typically bring to administrative positions an approach to leadership that is consistent with developmental, collaborative, and relationship-oriented behaviors, which are seen as more compatible with the idealized view of leadership. As such, these authors argued that women make more effective leaders than men.

Edward (1992), in his study of 5,233 managers of industrial firms in the USA, reported that women were rated higher than men by both peers and subordinates on all 35 leadership behaviors measured by his scale. Similarly, Posner & Kouzes (1992) found subordinates gave higher ratings for female managers (n=235) than male managers

(n=1371) on 2 of the 5 leadership sub-scales used in their study. The two attributes were "Modeling the Way" and "Encouraging the Heart". No gender differences were found on the other three sub-scales, i.e. "Challenging the Process", "Inspiring a Shared Vision", and "Enabling Others to Act".

Moss & Jensrud (1995), in their study of 248 female and 303 male vocational administrators, concluded that female administrators were judged to be more effective leaders than male administrators. Female vocational department heads had significantly higher ratings than males on 17 out of the 37 leader attributes used in their survey.

On the contrary, other theorists and researchers found no gender-related difference in the leadership behaviors of men and women. They argued that, given equivalent level of responsibilities within an organization, women and men exhibit the same leadership behaviors. Bartol (1978) concluded "there are either no differences or relatively minor differences between male and female leaders in leadership style, whether the leaders are being described by themselves or being described by subordinates". Ferber & Spitze (1979) found no evidence to suggest sex differences in leadership aptitudes or styles. Marshall (1984) concluded the same, stating that "… Women are very much the same as men. Their differences are qualities you say we need more of in the future. Perhaps women will make better managers than do men…"

Hence, studies on the differences between male and female leadership style consistently report inconclusive results. All the reviewers report as many studies that

found significant differences, as there were that found no differences. This could be due to the confounding effects of bias in the criteria used to assess leader effectiveness, or, bias of raters who apply the criteria (Moss & Jesrund, 1995; Marshall, 1984).

Regardless of the results, women do influence the workplace differently than men. Eagly & Johnson (1992) reviewed 162 studies examining leadership style across genders. Results indicate that there is a stronger tendency for women to adopt a more democratic or participative style as compared with men. Men tend to adopt a more autocratic or directive style. The findings of this research suggest that gender do influences leadership styles but does not indicate which style is considered more significant.

Other studies, however, proposed that women are often task-oriented, delegate less effectively, and overly controlled subordinates' work (Schein, 1989). In the aspect of social behavior, women differ from men in the workplace, especially relating to communication, interpersonal skills and assertiveness. Women are also considered as good listeners with highly developed verbal skills (Feuer, 1988). According to Loden (1985), women have characteristics necessary to succeed in the future because they are more concerned with people, have good interpersonal skills, and also have good decision-making and creative problem-solving skills.

2.2   Preference for Male or Female bosses

One of the reasons of openly expressed reluctance to employ women as managers is the claim that other people do not want to work for, or, deal with women at work. Marshall (1984) quoted a survey conducted by Harvard Business Review that involved 2,000 subscribers (half of them men) on their attitudes towards women executives. More than two-thirds of the men and almost one-fifth of the women said they would feel uncomfortable working for a female boss. Similar findings were made by Ferber et al (1979), in their study involving 1,400 male and female academic employees and university staff in a large mid-Western American university. They found 64% of males and 51% of females preferred working for or with male bosses.

Despite that, recent studies by Moss & Jesrund (1995) showed no gender biases in preference for either male or female bosses. Out of 90 male and 53 female instructors surveyed, neither male nor female respondents demonstrated gender preferences for the vocational administrators they rated. Hence, no conclusive results were found on this issue either.

2.3   Motivations towards Work

Evaluating women's motivation towards work, differences in opinions are evident. Hunt (1968) captured the force of women's interest in working by interviewing 7,000 women in the United Kingdom. The responses for the main reasons for working were (i) money, (ii) pleasant working colleagues, (iii) good working conditions, (iv)

desire for company, and (v) to escape boredom. Mirides & Cotes (1980) asked 355 women covering a mixture of occupation what they wanted from employment. 60% said "meaningful work", 55% chose "high income", and only 15% were interested in "promotion".

These findings were supported by Martin & Roberts (1984), in their survey of women and employment in the United Kingdom. They found that women's top most priorities in choosing jobs were (i) work you like doing (ii) friendly people at work, and (iii) secure jobs. Jobs with good career prospects are of least important in these women's priority lists. In contrast, men seek "economic considerations", "career prospects", and "the opportunity to use skills" in their choice of employment. Martin & Roberts claimed that since women do not seek careers, they do not aim for promotions or higher level of achievement in their jobs. It thus appears that although work is important to women, it does not take priority over all other aspects of life.

Nevertheless, there are studies showing no significant differences in male-female work motivations. Brief and Oliver (1976) did a comparative study of motivation at work on 105 retail sales managers (of whom 53 were women). By using Vroom's model of motivation (Vroom, 1973), respondents were asked to indicate their expectations of meeting sales targets and the importance to them of 25 job outcomes like fringe benefits, working relationship, prestige, job security, and personal growth. The authors found no significant difference between male and female expectations. Marshall (1984) also found

that many women have similar motivations towards work to men's; but practical difficulties explain why some do not translate these into action.

2.4   Perceptions towards Women

Employer's negative perception towards women is a more popular approach in explaining why there are so few women at the top. According to surveys conducted on stereotypes of women, potential employers feel that:

- Women allow their emotions to influence their management behavior;

- The possibility of pregnancy reduces women's values as employees;

- Women make better mothers at home;

- Women will be unable to balance work and family demand;

- Women will not get the support of their husbands for working.

Due to these perceptions, companies are reluctant to employ women or give them management responsibilities (Marshall, 1984).

Milwid (1990) during her interviews with professional women in the USA in the 1990s, found that American men categorize women into three distinct categories that make it difficult for them to gain credibility at work. The first is female temperament, i.e. the generalization that women are "too nice", or "too unstable" for business. Secondly, occupational ability, which states that subjects such as finance, electronics and plumbing are inherently beyond the scope of a woman's intelligence. Thirdly, men viewed women as family roles, such as mothers, sisters, and daughters. Once a female professional is cast in the daughter role, her credibility wanes.

Tan (1991) made similar findings for Malaysian women. Malaysian men perceived women as more emotional, less capable of bearing work pressures than men, and that a woman's place is at home. At work, women have to face not only the competition from other male managers, but also male prejudices towards women managers. We can see from here that cultural attitudes towards appropriate sex roles have truly limited the horizons for women.

Another popular stereotyping is, women are less committed to their jobs and work for less serious reasons than men. In terms of commitment, women are perceived to be less committed and less interested in working because they do not assign their jobs precedence over all other aspects of life. But, are women really less committed than men?

According to Lussier (1996), American Management Association surveyed its members and found that female managers are actually more committed to their careers as opposed to male managers with equivalent ages, salaries, education and managerial levels. Bielby & Bielby (1988) examined sex differences in work effort for ten occupational categories in the USA: professionals, managers, sales, clerical, craft, operative, transport, laborer, farm and services. They found a statistically significant difference in effort devoted to the job, with women on average devoting more effort regardless of occupation. They also discovered that women work more efficiently than men for a given level of pay. It appeared that women have lower standards of personal entitlement and tend to undervalue their efforts relative to men. Because of this, women may be allocating more effort than men to work activities.

Marshall (1984) stressed that women's commitment to employment may appear less substantial because other factors prevent them from doing so. For example strong feelings of responsibility for children, home and husband; their husbands' attitudes, and lack of appropriate training. She also noted that management has long been associated with a man's job. Surveys showed that both men and women view "male and manager" as compatible, but "female and manager" are incompatible. As the management stereotype is consistently male, women will be discouraged from thinking of management as a potential career because they do not identify very strongly with the role. Should they apply, they will find entry difficult because (male) employers do not see them as suitable material.

2.5   Promotion Bar

All the above propositions explain the presence of glass ceiling or promotion bar in organizations. Asplund (1988) denotes that promotion bar exists at the middle of the corporate hierarchy and restricts women's career progression. She defines the promotion bar as a magic frontier, which has to be crossed by anyone hoping to compete for the interesting posts at the top of the tree. The bar is not at the same place in all hierarchies, but anyone working within a particular hierarchy usually knows where it is.

In some organizations, the promotion bar is strictly and formally defined, as in the civil service where the promotion path is regulated and is specified down to the smallest detail. However, in private companies, it is often much more difficult to specify the qualifications needed for crossing it.