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How Hard do Women Climb the Ladder?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the glass ceiling and glass cliff relating to female career enhancement. Two theories relevant to the issue are highlighted and four relevant issues on the predicament of female employees being promoted to the management level are presented. First, the rate of female employees promoted to higher management position is far below than men. Second, factors that impede their career enhancement varies from personal to organization level. Third, women who break the glass ceiling face challenges as a leader. Fourth, this paper reviews the literatures on what employer and the female individual could do to improve the situation.

Keywords: female career advancement, glass ceiling, glass cliff, gender discrimination

INTRODUCTION

The 11th Malaysian Plan (2016-2020) emphasized the governance and women participants in the workforce, particularly at the management level. In the mid-term review (2018-2020), the government reinforced the governance aspect of female involvement in the organization, and the attention continues in the 12th Malaysian Plan (2021-2025), through its sharing prosperitied initiatives. Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance under Practice 4.5 has made it mandatory for large companies to appoint a minimum of 30% female to their board of directors. Similarly, female in the workforce is emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goal; SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth, and SDG 5 Gender equality. Empirical studies show that women presence on the board does not significantly influence the performance if the ratio is low (Arulvel & Pratheepkanth, 2019), and in critical mass theory, three or more female directors on the board is needed to observe a major impact on the organization (Ahmad, Rashid, & Gow, 2018). It is believed that a board that has people who have the same thinking and experiences will have a narrow view of the fast-changing world (CBE, Doldor, Battista, & Tessaro, 2020). This is proven by empirical studies that women directors significantly enhance innovative activity (Marina, 2018), is associated with higher corporate social reporting (Mohd-Said, Shen, Nahar, & Senik, 2018), increase profitability (Pangestu, Gunawan, & Wijaya, 2019; Zahid et al., 2020), and improve corporate sustainability proxied by workplace and a social, environmental, and economic dimension (Zahid et al., 2020). As reported in the corporate governance monitoring 2020 issued by Securities Commission Malaysia (2020), the percentage of women on board of the top 100 Malaysian listed issuers in 2019 has shown an improvement from 23.68% in 2018 to 24.82% in 2019, and an overall for all listed companies at 16.96% from

15.69% in 2018. 772 listed companies remain below the 30% and five companies in the top 100 issuers maintained all-male directors on their board. It was also reported that the Malaysian board is comprised of 17.47% women directors, while the remaining are dominated by their counterpart. Despite the increase, disclosure on the company's policies on gender diversity remains among the lowest level of adoption by the listed issuer.

THEORIES

Implicit Leadership Theory

Two theories relevant to females and leadership are implicit leadership theory and role congruent theory. Implicit leadership theory developed by Robert Lord explains that people have an implicit prior perception about the characteristics and qualities of a leader. Commonly known as 'a leader and follower interaction', this mental representation of a leader influences how they expect a leader should behave. Similar to stereotypes, they are stored in memory and will be activated when the person meets an individual whose characteristics and behavior match their perception. Though every individual has different perceptions, they commonly agree in terms of task skills and characteristics of a leader who is in control, determined, and influential. All by which is closely related to men. This theory suggests that when the perception is compared to the actual leaders, it may impact evaluation on the leaders and influence the amount of effort to support them. Hence the impact on the female as a leader is critical as this theory explains how roles take place and how to act in the workplace. This theory, however, varies for different cultural backgrounds. A characteristic of an effective leader may be valid in one culture, but perceived differently in another culture.

Role Congruent Theory

The role congruity theory explains two types of prejudice that arise from incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender roles are explained in the social role theory where they are referred to as communal and agentic attributes (Eagly, 1987). Communal attributes which primarily concern the welfare of other people are strongly associated with women for being helpful, kind, sympathetic, affectionate, sensitive, and gentle. Agentic attributes, on the other hand, are strongly recognized with men for being aggressive, dominant, forceful, independent, self-confident, and self-sufficient whereby these attributes are perceived susceptible as a leader. The role congruity theory may also explain how social perceptions of gender roles influence whether women are permitted to take on leadership roles. However, when women possess the leadership role and confirm the agentic attributes, people perceive it as a violation of social role. The negative perception of women with dominant leadership style is explained by the warmth-competence theory (Dupree & Fiske, 2017). The two dimensions: warmth (likeability and trustworthiness) and competency (respect and efficiency) are the motives for people's impression of others. Females who display dominant leadership are reputed as competent but not genial because they contradict with communal attributes as women. Thus, a female leader should show narrow agentic attributes to direct people to the warmth dimension.

ISSUES ON GENDER GAP

The gap in the labor force participation for men and women in Malaysia is higher compared to other countries, though the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar are the highest within ASEAN (Schmillen, Tan, Abdur Rahman, Amanina Binti; Lnu, & Weimann Sandig, 2019). The findings from the Malaysian labor force survey showed that housework or family responsibilities are

the main reason given by women for not joining the workforce. The NST business (2019) reported that in the third quarter of 2017, women's participation in the labor force was 54%. The percentage slightly increased to 55% in 2019 but there is a huge gap relative to men's participation at 94% from the same 25-54 age group. It suggests that the percentage of women's participation in workplace increased, but at a slow rate. In 2018, there were 39% of women in the workforce but only 27% held the manager position (UN Women & UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019). Despite producing higher female than male graduates, the gender gap in the workplace has not reduced (Ang, 2018) and female participation in the labor force dropped in middle management and recorded even lower at the board level (Chin, 2021).

The phenomena of low women participation in the workplace seem to have happened since long ago. A study conducted by Rahamah and Abu (2012) shows that there was an increase from 3.1% to 21.5% in 1970 and 1999 respectively, in which the increase was influenced by women's life cycle. The increase, however, was focused only on the group age of 25-29 years old. As the women passed that age, participation in the management level decreased.

Based on Figure 2, the female participation rated the highest at 75.1% in the group age of 25-34 years old, but declined to 57% at the age group of 45-54 years old. It further suggests that women leave the workforce before even reaching peak in their career. In contrast to men, their participation is the highest in these age groups. The common perception in leadership is leaders must always be men and women can only be supportive followers. The multiple roles carried out by women in running a career and running home and family imposed pressure on them, and some may be forced to drop their career. Consequently,the impact leads to gender discrimination in the workplace and limits opportunities for growth (Victor & Shamila, 2018).

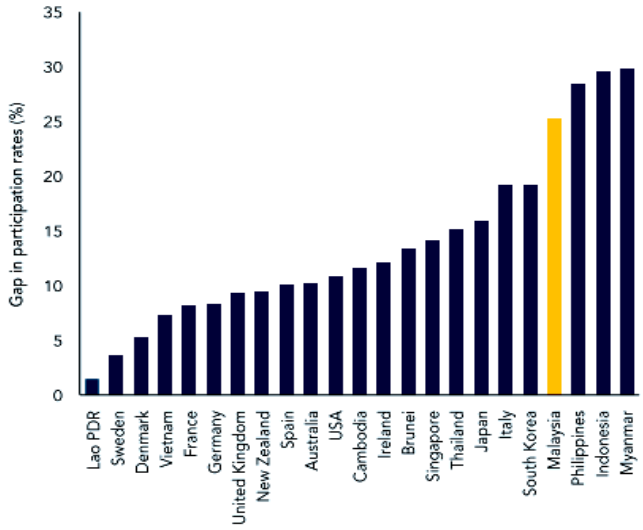


Figure 1: Gender gap in labor force participation rates by country, 2018 (Source: Schmillen et al. (2019)

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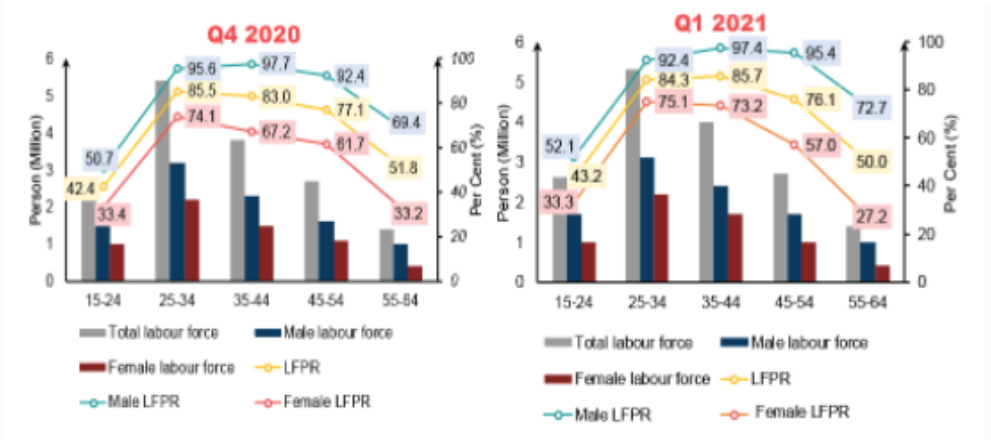


Figure 2: Labor force participation rate in Malaysia by gender, 2020/2021 (Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal)

WOMEN IN TOP MANAGEMENT

Glass ceiling and glass cliffs describe the obstacles women experience in the workplace. The term 'glass' means it is invisible yet significant as barriers for women to progress to the executive level, and if they do shatter the glass, they may be placed in a risky position termed as 'glass cliff'. In the presence of a glass ceiling, female employees will not achieve career satisfaction and contribute to organizational success although the organization provided organizational support, a flexible working environment, and job security (Srivastava, Madan, & Dhawan, 2020). It is also a disadvantage for women when they are perceived to be ideal followers, pushing more men to the leadership position (Braun, Stegmann, Bark, Junker, & Dick, 2017).

Glass Ceiling and Female Career Advancement

The phrase 'Glass Ceiling' was first devised by Marilyn Loden in 1978 when she was a panelist in the Women's Exposition in New York. She emphasized that besides women being allegedly claimed as possessing social deficiency and poor self-image, the glass ceiling is giving greater damage to their career advancement. The concept revolves around corporate hierarchy and the hidden barrier that prevents women from going up to the authority level. Srivastava et al. (2020) found that the presence of a glass ceiling reduces career satisfaction among women and forbid them from recognizing the organization's goal that ultimately limits their career development. These women are not able to identify the organizational goal even though they compromised on compensation, received good support for teamwork, a good working environment, and job security. The perception that women are always not readily available and often multitask with their personal life have disowned the trust from employers, and hence leading to the creation of a glass ceiling. Tominc, Šebjan and Širec (2017) who examined Slovenia organizations found that men in the top management are elusive towards gender equality where they believe that decision-making positions should be lead by men. Female management is perceived as emotional and bitchy, in contrast to superior management labeled for the male-dominated management (Siboni, Sangiorgi, Farneti, & De Villiers, 2016). Termed as 'brokenrung', women miss the first step up to manager ever since the beginning of their career (Boorstin, 2019). According to Saadin, Ramli, Johari and Harin (2016), although the

proportion of women in management have increased, involvement in decision-making is still low.

Studies showed that factors adversely affecting women's upward career advancements are management perception and work environment (Afza & Newaz, 2008), a discriminant process in recruitment at the selection and promotion level, weak human resource policies, lack of mentors, limited networking practices (Mn & Mukulu, 2012), and work-life balance and gender stereotypes (Saadin et al., 2016). The cultural issue has more influence on women's career enhancement than personal issues (BBC, 2017) and receives less sponsorship, less leadership training, and no upward training skill as early as in entry-level performance review (Devillard, Hunt, & Yee, 2018).

The low progression of female careers is linked to gender discrimination in the workplace. The gender stereotypes, status-value-beliefs, and the male-gender power have made the female believe they do not deserve recognition (Luekemann & Abendroth, 2018), and prioritizing the male over female has become an organizational culture (Dzubinski, Diehl, & Taylor, 2019). Perumal and Dastane (2017) found that female employees in the IT sector have low self-esteem, particularly in men-dominanted sectors. It is supported by Nilufer Azeez and Priyadarshini (2018) as they found self-perception to be the most significant factor before stereotyping and societal belief. Evidence also showed that women face challenges in career progression due to their usual order of social roles and knowledge gap. Women in the information sector are difficult to evolve when they are in the field of programming and software, but relatively easy in web design (Yildiz, Yıldız, & Arslan, 2018). Course selection is another evident factor affecting women's careers. Consistent with the enrollment statistics provided by the Malaysian Higher Education (Schmillen et al., 2019), females tend to choose courses such as social sciences, education, and arts that offer a job with low average wage (Ismail, Wye, & Palel, 2017; Vaghefi, 2018). Similar findings were reported by Bloomberg on the analysis of the American community that women pursue a career in a lower-earning position than the male in the same field of study (Gu, 2018).

Organizational commitment enhances women's career development (Bell & Sheridan, 2020; Guzeller & Celiker, 2020; Liu, Shen, & Gao, 2020) as a high sense of affective commitment, reducing the likelihood to leave an organization. To boost employee's organizational commitment, organizations must design suitable training programs to ensure employees retention and attract talented employees to progress their careers within the organization. Family factors, however, could limit women's commitment to the organization. Harniyati et al. (2021) who surveyed 100 Malaysians from Seremban city found that the factor of family and organizational has a significant impact on women's career development. It is commonly argued that women prioritize their responsibility towards family more than their career, especially when they are not able to manage both simultaneously. Instead, they sacrifice their career by choosing to work part-time, commit to flexible working hours, and settle with lower wages in return for a workplace that is closer to home; all of which do not foresee promotion opportunities (Vaghefi, 2018). Dealing with pregnancy is another challenge faced by careered women (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017). Contradictingly, Bazazo, Nasseef, Mukattesh, Kastero and Al-Hallaq (2017) identified that family is not the real issue. Based on the sample of Jordan organizations in the tourism sector, they found that culture and organizational practices are the strongest barriers to Jordan females reaching top positions,

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relative to family and social commitments. Similarly, Victor and Shamila (2018) found that culture is the most influential factor to the career advancement of executive-level female employees in the financial sector in the town area of Kandy District. Meanwhile, organizational factors and personal factors such as age, marital status, and number of children are not significant.

Mentoring is an important effort to support staff development but is still missing in many organizations in Malaysia (Samuel, Omar, & Hassian, 2020). It is frequently used as a managerial strategy to communicate organizational principles and culture, as well as to manage stress, encourage employee engagement, and reduce labor turnover (Chang & Busser, 2017; Dashper, 2020; Eissner & Gannon, 2018; S. S. Kim, Im, & Hwang, 2015; Uen, Chang, McConville, & Tsai, 2018). Thus, mentoring can help solve some of the chronic issues in terms of motivation, commitment, and retention (Sharples & Marcon-Clarke, 2019). Studies show that the career progression of women without mentorship in the IT sector becomes slower, particularly because IT is a male-dominated sector and cross-gender mentoring is not in practice (Perumal & Dastane, 2017). Mentoring positively influences women's retention and professional growth because it creates a third space for them to engage in the profession and build up confidence (O'Meara, Nyunt, Templeton, & Kuvaeva, 2019). Although evidence shows mentoring programs support women's career development, the benefits are linked more to relational support and emotional empathy and are not sufficient enough to support greater career goals (H. Kim, 2017). As mentioned by Datuk Shireen (2021), mentoring is inadequate to enhance women's career as the progress declines or even stop when the mentee has been trained to be 'board-ready' or assigned as 'mentor'. She further added that female career development requires an advocate who can create opportunities for a female to move to a higher level. This is another issue to look into as males have a better opportunity to access the resources in the professional advancement than women (Ellinas, Fouad, & Byars-Winston, 2018).

Glass Cliff and Female Career Advancement

'Glass cliff' is a term that originated from Ryan and Haslam (2005) who found that most female board members of FTSE 100 companies were appointed during a period of overall stock-market decline as compared to male appointment. Glass Cliff describes a situation of women who shattered the glass ceiling to hold a higher but risky position. The causes of the glass cliff were discussed in Vetter (2021); one of them referring it to 'Think Crisis Think Female'. Darouei and Pluut (2018) investigated reasons why women accept risky leadership positions despite being illustrated as risk-averse. The study found that self-efficacy is a significant factor differentiating males and females in the context of the glass cliff, and females who have low self-efficacy have more tendency to accept risky leadership positions as compared to men. They argued that this phenomenon is due to the constraint faced by women to climb the leadership ladders compared to men. Hence, women see it as a promotional opportunity. Babalola, Plessis and Babalola (2021) stated that prejudice against women remains even when they lead as some male counterparts threaten them at the initial stage of their leadership and comments negatively to their instructions. Some evidence suggests that passing through the glass ceiling is not the end as women may still experience more biases, challenges, and stereotypes. Women who start their leadership position in a time of crisis with low support to accomplish are susceptible to performance pressure, resulting in shorter tenure than male leaders (Glass & Cook, 2016). Main and Gregory-Smith (2018) however, identified that the shorter tenure of women directors in the UK boardroom relative to men's tenure was not due to the glass cliff effect, but mainly due

to the expiry of independence when they reached nine years of service. They argued that women were appointed at the beginning to signal gender diversity and was not associated with the glass cliff effect. Yaghi (2017) emphasized that when women were appointed to the leadership position, the success or failure in maintaining the position is not due to gender. Choice of gender is more influenced by organizational context - relational or financial types of crisis - and not due to stereotypes associated with gender as it is widely claimed to be (Kulich, Gartzia, Komarraju, & Aelenei, 2021). They further added that organizational, political, psychological, and regional factors are also contributing factors and the glass cliff effect varies in certain countries. The study argued that the early works on glass cliffs have methodological flaws and poor critical analysis on the argument. Glass cliff evidence reported in Ece (2020) was merely based on students' perception of whether companies with financial problems should appoint men or women managers.

Bechtoldt, Bannier and Rock (2019) findings do not support the glass cliff effect because market-based returns and return on equity between 2005 to 2015 showed positive trends in the pre-appointment period of women director in listed large companies in the US and Germany. Groeneveld, Bakker and Schmidt (2020) reported a similar outcome when more women in Dutch Civil service organizations were appointed during excessive growth. A meta-analysis carried out by Morgenroth, Kirby, Ryan and Sudkämper (2020) concluded that the glass cliff effect is not consistent nor universal as it depends on contextual factors, such as organizational domain, and are more apparent in countries with high gender inequality.

Support On Female Career Advancement

O'neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria (2015) stated that three critical factors that is worth investigation on women career advancement are (a) the differential impact of family or care-giving responsibilities on men and women careers, (b) women's psychological development that suggest a distinctive relational emphasis to infuse women's career development, and (c) women's under-representation and subsequent token status at higher organizational levels that constrain their career progression. Schmillen et al. (2019) highlighted three barriers faced by women, namely the barrier to participate in the labor force, the barrier to self-employment, and the barrier to becoming an employer. Though various factors limit women's career advancement, family factors are the first to be taken care of. To reduce those barriers, they suggested a general policy direction divided into five categories, mainly supporting child and elder care through the improvement of the law and procedure relating to women's welfare in the workforce. Among the highlights are expanding the definition of childcare services, updating and simplifying the procedure to improve the quality of the childcare services, and improving the law relating to female protection. Chin (2021) interviewed three corporate women relating to the glass ceiling phenomena. Among the suggestions are employers should provide a working culture that is flexible, balanced, and family-friendly, and women should be allowed to work from home when their family needs them, such as during sickness. Apart from that, women should stand for themselves and be confident with their talent because women are claimed to easily get jealous of their female colleagues and refuse to share their success (Elias, 2018). They should learn to stop thinking that they struggle alone and, instead, share the experience with other female companions. Moreover, they must become an exemplar to support and guide other younger women in the organization. Greguletz, Diehl and Kreutzer (2018) stated that networking for career advancement is less successful for women as compared to men, due to work-family conflict, homophily (the unfit feeling into men's dominant

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network), and moral concern that instrumental networking is regarded as exploitation. Women must dissect their professional journey and join the online and in-person networking consisting of men (Elias, 2018). They should take action to know their rights and be outstanding, find ways to fit into their counterparts circle, learn from leaders from both genders, avoid feeling weak, and be role models (Elias, 2018).

From the organization's perspective, current leaders should create a developmental culture that requires them to allocate strategic resources and long-term investment in recruitment (Chanland & Murphy, 2018). Development network that is crucial for successful diverse leadership is divided into four primary dimensions; diversity, size, tie strength, and multiplexity. Here, human resource plays a vital role in helping diverse leaders gain the development networks. Powerful and influential superiors are needed to help women break the glass ceiling (Ang, 2018). Sponsorship is effective when there is a comprehensive support structure including mentoring, training and development, performance evaluation, and succession planning (Perry & Parikh, 2019). Women should be able to break the glass ceiling if organizations provide an avenue for them to shine their talent through continuous assessment programs and accommodate them to the talent pipeline before channeling them to sponsors (Raghuvanshi, 2020). Organizations should cultivate a systematic and transparent practice on training and development, reward and recognition, organizational communication, and teamwork (Giao, Vuong, & Tung, 2020) as these are significant drivers enabling exceptional opportunities for women to learn, experience, and sharpen their skills. Ndebele (2018) suggested gender awareness workshop to reduce the negative perception on women leaders.
Cultivating leadership training in higher learning should be encouraged since female students who attend leadership training programs improve significantly on self-leadership, transformational leadership, and servant leadership (Oh & Lim, 2018), as well as improve knowledge on leadership, change in self-confidence, and appreciation on personal capabilities (Segovia-Pérez, Laguna-Sánchez, & de la Fuente-Cabrero, 2019). Female students should be exposed to social activities in universities as it will enhance their leadership skills in terms of communication, planning, and decision-making (Alghamdi & Ahmed, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the phenomenon of women's career advancement. The hurdle of women to reach the leadership position is termed as the ‘glass ceiling effect’. But when women shattered the glass ceiling, it was claimed that these women are at high risk of failure, termed as ‘glass cliff’. Existing evidence showed several factors within the organization that caused difficulty in women's promotion, and employers should strategize their policies and activities that support women's career progression. Nevertheless, supporting women’s career does not lie solely on the organization. Organizational support is essential, but it will only be fruitful when there are talented and worthy candidates. The success in reducing gender gap in the workplace requires proactive strategy by various parties – from the government’s perspective down to family upbringing, starting from the development of young girls in gaining confidence and social skills. Understanding the obstacle for women to be at par with men in the workplace requires a long process. Producing women with leadership characteristics begin when they receive formal education in schools and higher education. The policy of gender equality should be emphasized in higher learning institutions, as the curriculum and activities they are involved in at this level have the highest impact in developing their inner strength to become outstanding and successful in the future.

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