PARTICIPATION AND RETENTION OF WOMEN IN THE MALAYSIAN WORKFORCE: INCLUSIVENESS VS BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT: *Participation and retention of women in the Malaysian workforce have lately been given much attention. Many policies are in place to encourage women to become a key force in the labor market. However, despite the encouragement, there has only been a slight increase in the numbers of a female in the workforce, more so in the professional and managerial levels. This study looked at two groups of women, those currently working and those who worked but have since left the workforce. Analysis of findings showed that inclusivity at the workplace had a bigger impact on the retention of women in the workforce compared to the existence of barriers. It is pertinent to explore inclusiveness as an important agenda for women at workplaces today.*

Keywords: participation, retention, inclusiveness, barriers, women, workforce

1.   INTRODUCTION

Participation of males in the labor market (LFPR) exceeds 90% for the age category between 25 and 54 years whereas females in this category count for about 55% [1].

Women representation on boards of all Public Listed Companies (PLCs) increased from 7.9% in 2010 to 13.3% in 2017. Their representation on boards of Top 100 PLCs was 19.2% in 2017. Though an increase in percentage is recorded, the rates are still low [2].

Gender differences in professional workforce participation receive scant attention in Malaysia. It was only after the 1990s that the stature of women became a primary objective of the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1991-1995). A special fund for the development of women became significant and integral for empowering women in Malaysia. This plan promised, "to integrate women as equal partners in nation-building" and this desire continued into the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010), which pledged, "to provide an enabling environment to ensure more effective participation in national development".

Progress, however, remained slow. The Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) stated that steps be taken to increase the participation of women at all levels in both the public and private sectors, including entrepreneurial ventures. This plan proposed to review existing laws and related regulations to create a more conducive environment that encourages greater female participation in the workforce. The Tenth Malaysia Plan also urged the private sector to increase the participation of women, especially in senior positions, such as Chief Executive Officers and as members of the Board of Directors. Although plans to increase and integrate women into the workforce have been in place since the 1990s (as discussed above), nothing much has changed. Women's participation in the labor force has remained mostly static. In 1980, the participation was 23.4% and twenty-four years later (in 2004) their participation in the workforce only increased to 25.4% (an increase of a minute and dismal 2%). Not much has been done on the factors which contribute to this state of affairs, and research findings remain insignificant.

Only 45 percent of Malaysian women are in the workforce compared to 60 percent of Singapore and 70 percent of Thailand. Further, there is a decrease in the number of women in higher job positions especially in the professional workforce [3]. Research shows that various structural barriers inhibit women from full engagement with the workforce [4]. These barriers include among others, sex role stereotypes, gender discrimination in employment and "brain-drain" (the exodus of women from the white-collar workforce to stay at home and care for the family).

Evidence suggests that there has been a consistent gender gap in workforce participation with men being more likely than women to be engaged in the workforce [5][6] Inequalities between female and male workforce participation across a number of developed nations still exist [6]. The existence of this gap is recognized, but efforts to reduce and eliminate it are scant [7]. A report of the International Labor Organization using data of over 200 countries suggests that between 1980 and 2008, the gender gap narrowed slightly, from 32 to 26 percentage [8].

Over the years there have been many explanations why women fail to advance to senior managerial level [9]. Most organizations have been created by men and they have some prejudices that block women from progressing to senior positions. The prejudices include describing stereotypical characteristics of women such as emotionalism and limited stress resistance as negative leadership qualities. As a result, the masculine traits are generally regarded as more suitable for management. The organization itself has structural weaknesses that hinder women's career advancement. These weaknesses include a lack of diversity awareness, diversity initiatives and leadership training to promote women into management levels [10].

In addition [11] indicated that the challenges faced by women include the old boys' network, poor career planning, and unsupportive bosses. The advancement towards higher levels is difficult for women because the glass-ceiling still exists. It implies that the organizational barriers which are beyond personal control can be considered the most significant barrier towards women's upward progression [12]. The male-dominated working environment and an inequitable working culture which is prejudiced against women are cited as the main reason for women to leave the workplace [13, 14].

According to [15], the glass ceiling was created when society made women believe they should be home taking care of the family. This situation has changed tremendously since

women are being encouraged to pursue higher education and compete equally with men for the highest positions. In spite of the increase of highly educated women, the condition has not changed. Men are still ruling the companies and protecting their positions with well-managed 'glass-ceiling'. Though women are respected at the workplaces, they still find superiors who prefer to work with male colleagues [16]. Besides that, gender stereotyping is obvious when the organization assigns the tasks that entail decision making to the men. This can result in dissatisfaction and ultimately affect women's career advancement [17].

Other than various barriers at the workplace, there also exists a gender wage gap, where women get less pay than men [18]. Wage-related characteristics, such as experience, education and hours of work explain wage differences in blue-collared jobs. However, in white collared and managerial groups, though women surpassed men in all wage-related characteristics, men still received higher wages [19]. Biased processes in the workplace frequently cause this skewed representation.

Though there are high numbers of females in Malaysia's higher education institutions, Malaysian women's participation in politics and economics remain abysmally low [20]. Malaysia's situation is different from other emerging markets, where access to education for females is low, and hence limiting women's rise to a managerial position in organizations.

Organizations today use the terms diversity and inclusivity widely. Some use these terms interchangeably, though diversity is actually a component of inclusivity. Inclusive organizations have not only diverse individuals involved, but more importantly, they are learning-centered organizations that value the perspectives and contributions of all people, and they incorporate the needs, assets, and perspectives of communities of color into the design and implementations of universal and inclusive programs. Furthermore, inclusive organizations recruit and retain diverse staff and volunteers to reflect the racial and ethnic composition of communities they serve [21].

If diversity is about finding and hiring, then inclusion is about retention, loyalty, growth and cultivating leadership. As an organization becomes better at attracting and hiring diverse workers, it is crucial to eliminate systemic barriers and develop inclusive talent management strategies that retain and   promote   diverse   talents. An inclusive culture makes it easier for individuals to fit in and become part of a high-functioning team. An inclusive workplace enables an organization to embrace the diversity and richness of backgrounds and perspectives diverse employees bring and use their diverse talents to achieve business goals.

To reiterate, this paper so far has discussed the low participation rates of women in the Malaysian workforce. Malaysia has taken efforts to increase the participation of women through various national level policies. However, the rates have not shown significant improvement. Furthermore,

another problem that needs to be looked at is the retention of women at the workplace. It is a known fact that many women leave the organization due to family commitment and work-life balance issues. The government of Malaysia and organizations, especially Talent Corp, are working on policies and programs to attract women to stay in organizations and to progress and advance to higher managerial levels. Some of the programs worth mentioning include Career Comeback Program, Flexible Work Arrangements, Resourcing and Retaining Grants for organizations. In April 2018, it was reported that 195 women returned to work under TalentCorp's Career Comeback Program [22].

It is pertinent at this juncture to examine the reasons for the low participation of women in the workforce despite the efforts by the Government. Hence, this paper aims to understand the perception of women towards the policies at the workplace. Two areas of importance, namely inclusiveness at the workplace and the barriers to career advancement and retention, are examined. The respondents of this study are divided into two groups; the first group consists of women who are currently working and the second group, women who used to be part of the workforce but have since left the workforce.

2.   METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive, co-relational study that was conducted with minimal researcher interference and conducted in a non-contrived setting. The unit of analysis is an individual. To understand women's perception of issues of inclusivity and barriers at the workplace two groups of women participated in a survey. The first comprised women who currently hold middle to top positions in organizations whereas in the second, women who once worked in middle and top positions that left the organization and yet to re-enter the workforce, participated. A snowball sampling method identified the respondents of these groups. One hundred and seventeen women responded, seventy-seven for the first group and forty for the second. Ten questions on inclusivity, adapted from [23] formed the first part of the questionnaire. It asked questions relating to gender roles and gender-neutral practices at the workplace. The eleven questions in the second part asked on barriers to career advancement and retention of women at workplaces. These questions were adapted from [24]. Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires and through emails.

Reliability analysis was carried out on the items measuring inclusiveness at the workplace and barriers. The results are shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Reliability analysis on inclusiveness and barriers at the workplace

	No of items	Cronbach Alpha
Inclusiveness	10	0.780
Barriers	11	0.917

Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7 describes good internal consistency [25].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The respondents had a mean age of 37 (SD=11). They were mainly married and had children (41%), followed by those who were single but had dependents (25%). About 66% of the respondents held managerial positions, while the rest were in supervisory positions in private sector organizations in Malaysia. More than 48% of the respondents were from the service sector while the others were from the manufacturing sector.

The first set of 10 items looked at inclusive policies practiced at the workplace. Respondents were given 2 choices; to select either true or false based on their perception of the policies practiced at the workplace.

The characteristics of gender inclusive practices at the workplace are listed in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 Characteristics of gender inclusive practices at the workplace

Statement	True	False
At my organization, there is no stereotyping about women's and men's roles and occupations	70.9	29.1
The work conditions (work schedules, job titles, physical environment) are inclusive of both men and women	82.9	17.1
At my organization, there is a strong 'critical mass' of women, usually 30 percent or more throughout the organization	55.6	44.4
At my organization - opportunities for advancement are based on knowledge and skills	83.8	16.2
There is an emphasis on reducing sources of unnecessary stress such as harassment and work-family conflict	60.7	39.3
The language used at work is gender neutral; (i.e. manpower are not the norm)	66.7	33.3
The physical working conditions (equipment, clothing, shower, and toilet facilities are appropriate for men and women	86.3	13.7
Supervisors and Senior Leaders in my organization support women and men equally	85.5	14.5
Access to education and training opportunities are equal for both genders	90.6	9.4
At my organization, there are family-friendly work policies and there is no stigma associated in using these policies.	75.2	24.8

It is clear from Table 1.2 that a high majority of the respondents (60%-90%) responded positively to most of the statements regarding the gender inclusive characteristics practiced at their workplace. Only for item 3, the percentage responding for both true and false was about equal (55% and 44% respectively). This shows that there is a lack of women's presence in many private sector organizations in Malaysia.

Table 1.3 lists the statements regarding barriers at the workplace with regards to career advancement and retention of women.

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Statements	Agree	Disagree
Women in this industry are often excluded from informal networks.	61.5	38.5
Stereotypes about women's abilities and roles exist in this industry.	75.2	24.8
Women's advancement in this industry is not a priority for CEO's/Senior Leaders in the industry.	57.3	42.7
Women have a lack of professional role models in this industry.	47	53
Women's advancement in this industry has been slowed by their commitment to personal or family responsibilities.	66.7	33.3
Women receive less mentoring than men in this industry.	54.7	45.3
Women lack awareness of organizational politics in this industry.	48.7	51.3
Women are faced with inhospitable organizational cultures in this industry.	53	47
Women do not get enough opportunities for challenging assignments in this industry.	52.1	47.9
Women have less of a desire to advance to a senior level in this industry than men.	47	53
Women lack effective leadership styles for this industry.	33.3	66.7

In terms of the barriers listed in Table 1.3, it can be clearly seen that the respondents agreed that barriers and discriminatory practices are apparent in the industries they had worked/ are currently working in. Respondents, however, disagreed with statements on women's lack of professional roles, awareness of organizational politics and especially women lacking effective leadership styles. It is obvious from Table 1.3 that the respondents felt the discrimination at the workplace although they are competent enough to hold certain positions or take on certain responsibilities.

Further analysis was carried out to examine whether there is a difference between the two groups in terms of their responses on inclusiveness and barriers. Table 1.4 shows the t-test analysis.

Table 1.4 T-test analyses the differences between the two groups of respondents

	Employment Status	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Std Error Mean
Inclusiveness	Working	77	7.9091	2.11624	.24117
	Currently not working	40	6.9500	2.80064	.44282
Barriers	Working	77	5.5584	4.06362	.46309
	Currently not working	40	6.7500	3.73994	.59134

Levene's test for equality of variances showed that there was a significant difference between the two groups (p<.05) for the statements regarding inclusivity at the workplace. However, there was no significant difference in the statements regarding barriers for advancement.

Interestingly, only the scores for Inclusiveness are different at p<.05 with those who never stop working perceiving inclusiveness to be higher compared to those currently not working.

What does this mean? Or what can we infer from Table 1.4? The women who are currently not working perceived lower inclusivity in their workplaces compared to those who are working. However, barriers are perceived similarly by both groups. Could this mean that inclusiveness is more important for women compared to the existence of barriers? When women perceive lower inclusivity in their workplaces, they feel that they do not belong to the organization and their contributions to the organization are not valued. On the other hand, barriers or discrimination are probably expected by women especially in workplaces dominated by men. It makes it easier for women to accept discrimination or fight against it but they are affected more by policies that are not inclusive.

4.   CONCLUSIONS

For organizations to survive and thrive in today's complex, diverse, and global environment, it is essential to attain a competitive advantage. To hire and retain top-performing employees, one key differentiator is having an open and inclusive work culture. Diversity is an important issue for any modern business. It is not enough however to hire people of different nationalities, races, genders and sexual orientations – everyone needs to feel like they are truly welcome, safe and free to be themselves in the workplace. A diverse workforce brings a unique set of experiences and perspectives, which are essential for developing new ideas and innovation. Organizations should, therefore, use inclusion as a tool to collaborate with diverse employees and fully realize their talents.

A sense of belonging and inclusion should be a big focus for employers because it ensures that all employees, regardless of their background and experiences, can be connected with equal opportunity and create a healthier, more successful future together with their employers. The circumstances surrounding women such as their responsibility in caring and taking charge of household responsibilities will not change much in the future, hence it is the organization that has to change. The organization has to put into practice policies that will inculcate an inclusive culture at the workplace.

Malaysia has been giving prominence to women's participation in the workforce since the 1990s through various policies and programs. However, women's participation remained low. Studies on women's low participation and dismal numbers in top management usually discussed barriers in workplaces. However, this study found inclusivity at workplaces to be an important element for women to participate and be retained as productive employees.

Workplaces need to put in place policies that support inclusiveness of women at the workplace. For a start, organizations need to recognize and assess unconscious bias and gender schema in interactions with the team, in performance reviews, in promotions, and in informal workplace culture. Organizations also need to examine all current processes through an "inclusivity" lens to ensure that these processes do not impact people differently. If men continue to help the organizations, diversity and inclusive efforts will not gain much momentum nor bring much change. This is because women and men see the state of women—and the success of gender-diversity efforts differently. Men are more likely to think the workplace is equitable; women see a workplace that is less fair and offers less support. Men think their companies are doing a pretty good job supporting diversity; women see more room for improvement. Men are less committed to gender-diversity efforts, and some even feel that such efforts disadvantage them.

Moreover, in 2017 job satisfaction levels for women correlated with certain other things, such as (i) the perception of gender equality in their workplaces; (ii) seeing gender-diverse management teams at their companies; (iii) longer maternity leaves taken; and (iv) their perception that they work in a family-friendly environment [26].

Diversity and inclusion efforts are worthwhile, especially on a global level. In the United Kingdom, senior executive teams proved a 3.5 percent increase in earnings before interest and taxes with every 10 percent increase in gender diversity. It has become important to create environments where all people are encouraged to draw upon their unique experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds to advance business goals. To achieve this in a global work setting, it's crucial to employ effective global communication and training efforts.

It is critical that senior leadership model diversity and inclusion. When senior leaders own diversity and inclusion and make themselves a part of the diversity and inclusion management process, it sets the tone for the rest of the organization to follow suit.

Finally, in concluding this paper, once again the concept of inclusiveness is highlighted. It is not enough to only hire a diverse workforce. It is crucial to leverage diverse perspectives for the benefit of the business as a whole. It is important to bring awareness to unconscious bias and discuss it in terms of the organization. In doing so, multiple perspectives are shared and considered.

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