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Challenges in implementing educational strategies for women's career advancement towards advancing SDGs in Malaysia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to identify the key challenges in implementing educational strategies for women's career advancement in Malaysia's corporate sector, and to evaluate their impacts on advancing gender equality (SDG 5) and quality education (SDG 4) in the country. The study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing the combination of purposive and snowball sampling to conduct in-depth interviews with senior female executives in Malaysia, exploring their experiences and perceptions of obstacles on the implementation of educational strategies for women empowerment in the corporate sector. The findings uncover four major challenges in implementing effective educational strategies for women's career advancement which are insufficient organizational support and underrepresentation of women leaders; unconscious gender bias and stereotypes; resistance to change and work-life balance challenges. The study offers practical insights for corporate sectors and human resource management to develop comprehensive policies and practices that is essential to empower women and promote gender equality within the organization. The challenges identified in the findings provide valuable direction for the development of targeted interventions and strategies that address the unique challenges women face in the corporate sector, thereby enhancing their leadership potential and contributing to the achievement of gender equality and quality education as outlined in SDG 5 and SDG 4. This qualitative approach offers a unique, in-depth understanding of the challenges and successes women face in their career advancement. The findings will provide valuable insights for corporate sectors, policymakers, and human resource management on the guidance to develop an effective framework and approach that promotes gender equality and women leadership within Malaysia's corporate setting and contribute to both academic literature and practical interventions.

Keywords: women empowerment; leadership development; educational strategies; Malaysia; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 4 (quality education); women in leadership; career advancement; corporate leadership

1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global agenda, accepted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, consisting of 17 interconnected goals that serve as the international "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all" by 2030 (Singh, 2024). These objectives deal with the present global challenges, namely, poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace, and justice. To be more particular, SDG 4 and SDG 5 concentrate on education and gender equality, respectively. SDG 4 seeks to "ensure inclusion and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Smith et al., 2020). That goal reaffirms the significance of quality education access

as a fundamental human right and as the basis for the betterment of people's lives and sustainable development. Under this goal, activities are designed to remove gender disparities provide equal access to all levels of education to all children and enhance accessibility to vocational training and post-secondary education. SDG 5, on the other side, is devoted to the attainment of "gender equality and empower all women and girls" (Tonegawa, 2022). Therefore, achieving gender equality is imperative not only on moral grounds, but also as an essential prerequisite of a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. The goal of SDG 5 is to put an end to women and girls' discrimination and violence, abolish harmful practices like child marriage, and early or forced marriage, and ensure equal chances in leadership and decision-making in all the sectors of society. Together, these 2 SDGs emphasize the interrelated relationship between education and gender equality in driving comprehensive sustainable development across global societies.

In Malaysia, these SDGs have been strategically incorporated within its national agenda, aligning with the nation's vision to "achieve sustainable growth along with fair and equitable distribution, across income groups, ethnicities, regions, and supply chains" by the year 2030 (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2019).

However, Malaysia performance towards these SDGs remains underwhelming. According to the SDG Report 2024, Malaysia ranks 79th out of 167 countries in overall SDG performance, with a country score of 69.3%, which is slightly above than the regional average of 66.5% (Sachs et al., 2024). Among the 17 SDGs and their related targets, only 40% have been achieved or are on track while the remaining 60% of targets remain stagnant. SDG 1 (no poverty) is the only goal that has been achieved while SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) is the only goal that is on track to be achieved. The performance for other goals has been disappointing, particularly in SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 14 (Life Below Water), where the country struggles with high levels of CO₂ emissions and poor marine conservation control.

For SDG 4 (quality education), Malaysia face challenges, including a low secondary completion rate indicating stagnant progress towards this goal. Furthermore, a gender gap issue has been identified in tertiary and vocational education enrolment where these fields remain male-dominated (Ministry of Economy, 2023). Similarly, Malaysia's performance in SDG 5 (gender equality) has been facing major challenges, mainly due to low participation of women in the labor force, underrepresentation of women in government parliament and leadership position. These issues, intensified by deep-rooted societal norms and structural barriers, have been hindering the country's progress in advancing gender equality and women empowerment. Despite Malaysian government effort in incorporating these SDGs into its national agenda and its nation's vision, the poor performance of the nation reflects policy gaps and inadequate integration of sustainable development initiatives into the national economic planning. Referring to 17 Big Bolds introduced by Malaysian Government, which outline 71 key strategies and initiatives to address the socio-economic development of the nation in line with SDGs, only one of these bolds, namely enculturation of MADANI society, specifically designed to address the issues of SDG 4 and SDG 5 (Ministry of Economy, 2023)

1.1. Problem statement

Despite the national efforts and progression on SDG 4 and 5, Malaysia continues to face significant challenges towards achieving these targets, particularly in the implementation of educational strategies that effectively empower women for career advancement in the corporate sector.

One major issue is the lack of integrated educational and training programs that are specifically designed for women's leadership development (Samuel et al., 2020; Sham et al., 2021). Typical leadership programs ignore the special obstacles working women encounter. These may include societal expectations, discrimination in the workplace or difficulty in balancing work and domestic responsibilities (Azam and Arumugam, 2023; Samuel et al., 2020). Yet, these programs often fail to equip women with essential core skills such as negotiation, work-life management, and confidence building, which are crucial for leadership roles (Rasdi et al., 2020; Sham et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the deep-rooted gender inequality in the workplace has resulted in women having restricted access to essential networks, fewer female leaders as role models, and a general preference for traditional male leadership styles (Aman et al., 2019; Samuel et al., 2020). This environment not only discourages women from putting themselves forward for leadership roles but also blunts the effectiveness of strategies designed to empower them (Aman et al., 2019; Baqutayan, 2020).

Moreover, the implementation and execution of these educational strategies are usually restricted by the lack of support from key stakeholders such as governmental entities, academic institutions, or corporate management. Without these supports, the progress towards achieving the national target on gender equality and women's career development will be hampered, especially when the educational empowerment strategies are not enforced into national and corporate policies. Most importantly, it results in underutilization of potential talent and weaker progress towards the accomplishment of SDGs in particular about promoting an inclusive and equitable corporate environment.

1.2. Research objective and research questions

Based on the issues above, the objective of this research paper is to identify and analyze the specific challenges that hinder the effective implementation of educational strategies for empowering women for leadership roles in the workplace. It will evaluate how these challenges impact women's career development and propose feasible strategies to promote a fair and inclusive corporate environment, in alignment with SDG 4 and 5 in Malaysia. In addressing the research objective, this paper poses the following research question:

- What are the main challenges hindering the effective implementation of educational strategies on empowering women towards leadership role in Malaysia's corporate sector?

1.3. Significance of study

This research paper aims to examine the complex relationship between educational intervention and women's employment promotion in Malaysia's

corporate sector and their career impacts. This paper contributes to the broader objectives of SDG 5 and SDG 4 by identifying the challenges of women's career advancement and assessing the effectiveness of educational strategies. The paper's findings will provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and corporate leaders on the guidance for the creation of more inclusive policies and practices that can capitalize on women's potential as important drivers of sustainable development in the country.

1.4. Novelty of study

The study focuses on examining the challenges of adopting educational practices in the Malaysian private sector, a critical topic that has not received sufficient research. In contrast to other studies on gender equality, this paper explores real-world obstacles and offers targeted, workable solutions that are appropriate for Malaysia. This approach offers creative ways to incorporate the SDGs into business practices and improves knowledge of how the local company culture affects gender roles. It also provides a model that can be applied to other comparable socioeconomic contexts.

1.5. Limitation of study

This study faces several limitations that may impact the breadth and depth of its findings. As the research methodology requires interviews with women leaders from corporate sectors, the availability of the interviewees is constrained due to their work commitment and geographical locations, thus sample size is limited. Moreover, these high-ranking female executives are often underrepresented in STEM industries thus limiting the range of insights and the representativeness of the findings. Also, the research is based on qualitative data from interviews which can introduce subjective biases from interviewees due to their personal beliefs and experiences. Therefore, these limitations restrict the generalizability of the results across different subgroups and broader contexts. Lastly, the study is restricted to time duration as government policy and societal changes occur rapidly, the findings of challenges and strategies may evolve and be irrelevant after the study's conclusion, thus it requires ongoing research to keep the conclusions relevant and applicable.

2. Literature review

2.1. Underpinning theory

Social Role Theory

The Social Role Theory illustrates how cultural gender roles impede women from expressing themselves as leaders (Eagly and Koenig, 2021). This theory postulates that the role traditions of men and women within societies act as a barrier to women aspiring to leadership positions. As the social norms about gender roles have a significant impact on how people behave, and what opportunities and obstacles they encounter in various circumstances, including the workplace.

The study uses Social Role Theory to provide a theoretical foundation to explain the persistence of gender disparities in corporate leadership roles and how

educational strategies aimed at empowering women for leadership roles may face significant implementation challenges in Malaysia. Conventional gender roles place women as caregivers and housewives, which makes them feel that their space is reserved in the domestic sphere rather than corporate leadership positions (Tamunomiegbam and Arinze, 2024). Such embedded norms are deeply rooted and spread everywhere through family upbringing, media presentations, and societal expectations. Women who aspire to be leaders are likely to face societal resistance or pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles, which may deter them from pursuing or accepting leadership opportunities (Azmi et al., 2024). Moreover, leadership roles are traditionally associated with masculine traits and women who carry out activities that are deemed to be masculine are likely to be punished (Roskam and Mikolajczak, 2020). Confronting the sociocultural barriers necessitates a combined effort to refute traditional gender roles, encourage gender equality, and create an inclusive environment that values and supports women's leadership ambitions.

2.2. Sustainable Development Goals and Malaysian national agenda

2.2.1. Relevance of SDG 4 and 5 to the Malaysian national agenda

SDG 4 focuses on quality education, recognizing that Education is basic to raising the quality of the lives of individuals and achieving all-round development. The fourth sustainable development goal represents Malaysia's focus; within the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), the responsibilities for inclusiveness, quality, and access to Early childhood education, primary, secondary, and post-secondary education are highlighted (Adams and Tan, 2022; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). Education proposals of the Malaysian government aim at an effective and equal distribution of children's rights to education irrespective of social class or location. This is essential if there is to be any improvement in existing disparities thereby enhancing social justice (Abdullah and Letchamanan, 2022). In this manner, Malaysia seeks to increase the rate of schooling for all its citizens, and consequently, reduce the disparity of the population demographics as well as geographical locations.

The Malaysian desire is to guide young people to be equipped for global competition through the principles inherent in this context. The Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2020) supports this by targeting raising the quality of higher education (Abd Rahman and Zakariyah, 2021). This initiative cultivates the preparedness of the graduates in matters of knowledge and skills that they require when they are out there in the international market. Malaysia understands the need for developing technical and vocational skills in the economy and therefore has adopted TVET training into the nation's educational system with an added focus on skill delivery within National Key Economic Areas (Mustapha, 2017). This emphasis on skills development is intended to equip students with skills that are readily transferable to the various economies hence improving on the employment opportunities as well as the economy of the various nations.

SDG 5 focuses on gender quality and all females, "ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls" (Women, 2022). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development or otherwise known as MWFC, D,

established in year 2001, is responsible for the implementation of gender mainstreaming and along with its mission to “integrate the perspectives of women and society into the mainstream of national development and strengthen the family institution towards improving social welfare” (MWFC, 2022). Malaysia has made legal reforms, concerning changes to the Employment Act to increase protection against sexual harassment, bring Flexible Working, and better Maternity Rights (Sharifah and Ahmad, 2003). The following reforms are meant to improve gender equity and protect women against harassment at the workplace (Putul and Mia, 2020). Whereas these reforms overcome legal hurdles and prejudice against women, they enhance women’s employment opportunities in the workforce.

There are such schemes as Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia and the Women Entrepreneur Funding Programme which offer microfinancing and particular credit solutions for women entrepreneurs (Razak et al., 2020). Programs like TEKUN Nasional and Malaysian Global Innovation and Creativity Centre (“MaGIC”) are conducive to the development of business hence increasing women’s economic engagement (Ramli and Yekini, 2022). These are meant to economically enhance the women as the government aim at providing them with the capital and other needs in starting and running their ventures. This is done to enhance the women’s leadership roles in Malaysian Organizations, quotas have been set where the nation targets women to fill certain strategic positions in the public and private domains (Elias, 2020). For this reason, women’s representation and recognition in all facets of society is essential for their input to be valued. Women’s leadership relates to capacity development, which is a facilitating of sustainable development, which involves balancing the decision-making role. The inclusion of SDG in the Malaysian national policies shows that the country is part of the intended SDG (Yusof and Ariffin, 2020). The integrational approach integrates education and gender equality because it is realized that both factors pertain to one another as means that facilitate development in every facet.

2.2.2. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) and Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2025)

The Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2013–2025 is a holistic policy plan and the Malaysian Government’s vision to improve the education system so that it may be in parallel with the country’s vision; Education for All (EFA) by 2024 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013). This blueprint highlights the government’s vision for educational development and aims to raise performance standards and increase the accessibility of education irrespective of students, social status, or geographical location (Chua and Low, 2024). Another significant goal of the Malaysia Education Blueprint is the vision to give equal chances to receive quality education. The following goal relates to the inequalities in education that can be observed depending on the geographic location and individuals’ characteristics. In this way, the blueprint emphasizes the idea of equality and envisages the improvement of the learning environment in terms of the talented but often excluded minorities’ needs.

The blueprint aims its reformative efforts towards the general enhancement of educational standards with measures such as curriculum changes, teacher training and development, and even test-taking strategies. Through the improvement of

educational standards in the blueprint, students will be in a position to fit into the global economy that is rapidly changing. This is not only predicted by achievements in academic results, the use of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and mastery of digital technology (Siambi, 2023). Focusing on the role of technical and vocational skills in the economy, the blueprint stresses the development of Technical and Vocational Education and Training TVET on the national level. This constitutes increasing the availability of and capacity of TVET programs as well as enhancing the quality of the programs to meet the labor market supply (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). In this regard, the blueprint attempts to prepare learners for future employment to meet the needs of the job market and push the context's economic development forward (Wan and Abdullah, 2021).

The Malaysia Education Blueprint is a more general document that encompasses educational development at all levels, while the Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2025) is specifically related to the state of higher education in the country (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). This blueprint is envisaged to raise the quality of Malaysian HEIs to the level of other countries and be able to produce graduates with capabilities to meet the challenge of the global economic structure (Da Wan et al., 2022). Concerning the key objectives of the Higher Education Blueprint, one of the priorities is to upgrade the quality and standards of higher education. Some of the objectives include improving the quality of teaching and learning processes and guaranteeing that higher institutions of learning are well-recognized internationally. According to the blueprint for the enhancement of higher education, the ministry set the standards higher and aspires to attract international students as well as create Malaysia as a center for higher education in the region (Abdullah, 2023).

As with the case of the Malaysian Education Blueprint, the Higher Education Blueprint also focuses a lot on equal opportunities. This also involves providing devices for learners of different types of schools to gain access to colleges and universities and it also concerns matters pertaining to finance to make sure that financially incapable but academically able students cannot be locked out of colleges and universities. Bursaries, study loans, fellowships, grants, and other measures are components of this strategy aimed at making it possible for anybody to attend college. Each blueprint discusses gender in relation to education and the necessity of its integration into the modification process. According to the policies, girls and women must be provided with equal education from the lower level to the high level. This is in line with SDG 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls.

In this particular case, the Malaysia Education Blueprint together with the Higher Education Blueprint can be considered as an attempt to enhance a more comprehensive approach to structural changes in the Malaysian education system (Suo, 2023). These policies offer a framework for how to reform the learning institution by dealing with matters concerning inclusiveness, quality, and gender. The linking with the Sustainable Development Goals Especially Goal 4 and SDG 5 shows that Malaysia cares for sustainable development and the development of an equitable education system. It should be noted that the attainment of the goals profiled under these blueprints can be attained with the support of the government,

academic institutions, and the business fraternity. Malaysia measures its success in Education by incorporating stakeholders as the key demand side mechanism to implement and monitor policies and standards in education. It is crucial for responding to the difficulties and developing the prospects for the improvement of the country's educational system (Bakar, 2023).

2.3. Educational strategies for women's career advancement

Malaysian women's leadership development has over time emerged through several educational programs as well as efforts that seek to enhance women's rights. These programs are aimed at preparing women for different sectors by availing them of skills, knowledge, and opportunities for there to be leadership gains. More crucial interventions include the community savings groups that have played a vital role in the enhancement of women's leadership capacities. Bakar (2023) establishes how these groups with most of them even being directed by women, are not just financial resources for their male counterparts but a basis through which women can also develop leadership skills and proactively transform society. These groups improve on savings and cooperation and ensure that the pooled resources are used to fund local development projects hence empowering women to fully engage in leadership of governance affairs at the community level. Another key domain is the promotion of women's management of health systems especially through calls for funding by development partners. In this context, Matenge et al. (2022) considered the effect of these programs in low and middle Malaysia's income nations and their significance in the elimination of the limitations that reduce women's participation in leadership positions. In this case, the authors noted that there is a certain level of positive findings, future work in this line needs more satisfactory assessment tools to assess whether successful interventions translate into long-term results and success.

In addition, since the future leaders of female populations are being educated in these higher education institutions, the educational programs do play a significant role. In another paper by Karim et al. (2023), they look at the use of mobile technologies in higher education for culture change with regard to gender equality and women's rights. In the same respect, the study establishes that mobile technology is useful in the promotion and development of women's leadership and academia, overall leadership and Women's Empowerment. Initiatives such as the Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia or AIM are other areas that need to feature a lot more in women's economic liberation. These microcredit programs' primary focus for its funding is poor women, offering them capital and technical support businesses. Aziz et al. (2022) argue that such endeavors enhance women's economic position and leadership advancement to enhance their contribution to economic progress.

2.4. Challenges in implementing educational measures to increase women's roles in management

Various educational initiatives aim to enhance women's participation in management roles in Malaysia's corporate world. However, despite these efforts, significant challenges persist. These obstacles stem from deeply rooted cultural expectations, workplace sexism, stereotypes, and discrimination, as well as gaps in

corporate mentorship, organizational support, and work-life imbalance, which continue to hinder women's career progression.

2.4.1. Cultural expectations and traditional gender roles

Malaysian culture expects women to be family-oriented and prioritize family responsibilities over their careers, which conflicts with the demands of being in corporate leadership positions (Adapa and Sheridan, 2019; Noor et al., 2019). These societal pressures can avert women from seeking management positions or engaging in leadership training and that, in turn, can obstruct their career advancement grip. Culturally constructed roles within Malaysian society ensure that women are confined within traditional feminine roles that narrow down the leadership and career progression corridors. These are societal norms and mindsets that deprive women of their right to work or build a career as they are expected to stay at home and take care of the family. This cultural belief poses a major challenge to women who seek promotions to leadership roles, especially since many are expected to be homemakers as well. Thus, this dual burden can make some women retire from leadership positions or avoid committing time and energy to professional development. Moorthy et al. (2022) have pointed out that often there are social barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior positions because it is so stressful to work and fulfil all the roles imposed on women.

2.4.2. Sexism, discrimination, and stereotypes in the workplace

Sexism and workplace discrimination remain significant barriers that negatively impact women's career advancement in Malaysia's corporate world. Sexism is evident in how people get hired, and promoted, in those unconscious ways people communicate and behave at the workplace. Gender stereotypes can be addressed in both conscious and serious discriminations such as prejudices in employment, universal advancement, and leadership positions (Ariffin et al., 2020). It means that women are considered to be not as capable of dealing with stressful positions or not as dedicated to their jobs as they are expected to have family responsibilities to prioritize and take care of. It is therefore expedient to highlight that such mischievous and demeaning biases not only can lead to women being overlooked for promotions or critical projects, but also restrict the successful and effective implementation of educational strategies aimed to promote gender equality and women leadership development in the workplace. As a result, this will continually limit women career progression, irrespective of their abilities and results (Noor et al., 2022; Yoong, 2020). Without raising awareness of these issues and addressing them correctly, these initiatives are unlikely to receive sufficient organizational support, making it difficult to develop more supportive policies and weakening the impact of the existing policies intended to support women's leadership capabilities. As a result, women's leadership capacities are undermined, and they are unable to gain the visibility and the opportunities they need to enhance their careers. It is for such reasons that these biases affect a woman's confidence and aspiration toward realizing leadership potential. Such discriminative practices not only devalue women's contributions at the workplace but also create an environment where their leadership abilities and potential are not fully recognized or nurtured.

2.4.3. Mentorship, sponsorship and networking gaps

Another major issue that concerns the question of women in corporations is the problem of mentorship and networking, sponsorship and connections are essential for building and climbing up the corporate ladder, but equally, these are lacking for women (Azam and Arumugam, 2023). The lack of female leadership increases the shortage of female mentors and role models which results in women not being able to get the support they need to progress their working careers (Khalid et al., 2021). According to Donkor and Mazumder (2021), role models help impart information in terms of mentoring and motivation. Since there are no female leaders, there are not many role models for women to turn to when facing specific issues related to their chosen profession. The absence of positive role models and sponsors results in the perpetuation of the UNSDWA's revised cycle whereby women are less likely to consider or achieve leadership positions, a factor that fuels gender disparities in the workplace. Hence, there are big chance that women will be limited from appropriate information, important experiences, and chances at the workplace end and leadership roles, thus fanning the gender gap in organizational leadership.

2.4.4. Lack of organizational support and career development

Lack of organizational support regarding career development is also identified as a major challenge that hinders the promotion of women into leadership positions (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2022). Most organizations lack the policy and practice framework to address women's career progression properly. These are the lack of appropriate and effective maternity leave flexible working conditions, or career development for women employees. Thus, organizations that do not offer a positive context may prevent women from attending leadership development programs and training, thereby limiting their development and full potential (Diehl et al., 2020).

2.4.5. Work-life balance challenges

Problems with work-life balance only complicate the existing issues related to women's leadership. The problem of access to living and working support, including the limited availability of cheap childcare and flexible working options, hinders women in their attempts to manage working and family life (Essandoh et al., 2023; Subri et al, 2020). Some of these responsibilities may be challenging to manage and women faced with such challenges may not be in a position to adhere to the stringent nature of leadership positions and hence may not be in a position to cope with the demands of leadership positions hence denying them promotions (Mowpia, 2023; Noronha and Aithal, 2020).

2.5. Literature gap

Though the role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in different national contexts has been extensively studied, however there is still a great deal of information missing about how the SDGs, especially Goals 4 and 5, fit into Malaysia's national agenda, particularly concerning women's empowerment and equitable education. Existing research has investigated the general context between gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an emphasis on how SDGs 4 and 5 are being implemented in different nations, including Malaysia. Despite the global efforts to attain gender equality and universal education

are well stated in this research, they have not precisely addressed the long-term impact of these SDGs on women's leadership roles and economic advancement in Malaysia. Previous study conducted by Adams and Tan (2022), have looked at the broad educational policies meant to give women more access to microfinance and education to empower them. These studies, however, mostly ignore how these programs support women in higher positions in terms of economic empowerment and leadership development.

There is a huge gap in the study on specific strategies under the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) and the Higher Education Blueprint (2015–2025) which target women's leadership development. Furthermore, though various educational and policy reforms have been analyzed the intersection of these reforms with SDGs 4 and 5, predominantly concerning their effectiveness in fostering sustainable gender equality and women's leadership opportunities, remains neglected. The study intended to close this gap by evaluating how Malaysia's gender-focused policies and national education system contribute to the achievement of SDGs 4 and 5. By doing this, it will expand on earlier research and offer insights into the ways that gender-specific strategies and educational reforms affect women's advancement into leadership positions as well as their access to education, giving a complete picture of the wider effects of these policies.

3. Research methodology

For this study on challenges in implementing educational strategies to empower women in Malaysia's corporate sector, the research setting focuses on women leaders from various corporate organizations in Malaysia. This multifaceted research environment is essential to examine gender disparity and women empowerment, identifying challenges to the implementation of effective educational strategies in the corporate sector.

3.1. Research design

The research adopted a qualitative phenomenology approach, by conducting interviews, to explore women's empowerment, educational strategies, and their implementation challenges within the corporate sector of Malaysia. This approach allowed the offering of an in-depth view into these women's lives, and their working and leadership experiences thus revealing the nuanced barriers they face in their professional life and providing insights into how these challenges impact women's career advancement and leadership opportunities in Malaysia. Qualitative research, due to its characteristics, allows the capture and retaining of in-depth and context-rich insights when interpreting text data to understand and explore the complex meaning of human action, experiences, and social phenomena (Subedi, 2023). Rather than setting out with a fixed selection of possible answers to test predetermined assumptions, it allows open-ended interview questions to be asked and formulates answers as they arise within the context (Carter and Little, 2007). The Phenomenology Approach originates from the philosophical perspectives that focus on the ways through which individuals experience their world and make sense of the various occurrences that take place in their lives (Teherani et al., 2015). In essence,

this approach is helpful in research that seeks to understand the fundamental ontology of lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

3.2. Participant selection

This study utilized an integration of two non-probability sampling methods to select research participants. Firstly, the purposive sampling method was employed to identify potential participants who were best fit for the research interest, namely department heads and senior female executives with more than 10 years of experience in people-management roles. Based on their career and leadership experiences, these individuals were assumed to have a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by female professionals therefore able to provide context-rich evidence on workplace gender equity, women empowerment, and educational strategies in Malaysia's corporate sector.

After that, the snowball sampling approach was employed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and to further expand the participant pool. As the researcher has limited personal access to women leaders in various corporate organizations and industries, the study relied on initial participants to recommend new participants who met the study's criteria and could provide valuable insights into the research focus. In qualitative research, snowballing sampling is commonly employed where the researcher does not have a direct connection to the participant group and thus has to contact others who then connect them to research participants (Marcus et al., 2016; Parker et al., 2019).

To begin the process of participant selection of the study, the researcher used personal connections with female professionals in various organizations that most closely matched the targeted population. The first step of participant selection involved identifying the existing female acquaintances with their current job positions through social media platforms, including LinkedIn and Facebook. Six (6) female individuals were identified with diverse professional backgrounds, including two (2) from the accounting field, two (2) from the Banking field, one (1) from Information Technology (IT) field, and one (1) from Human Resources (HR) field. These individuals were contacted through phone chats and platform mailboxes to explain the study's purpose and seek their consent for research participation. Among these contacted individuals, only two agreed to the interviews and recommended researchers with other potential participants hereafter, making a total of five (5) participants contributed to this study. Upon obtaining the potential participants list, the research approached the potential individuals with general personal questions such as gender, age, and professional experience to ensure their relevance to the study focus. Once research relevance was confirmed, research scheduled personal interviews with the participants depending on their geographical locations and availability.

3.3. Data collection

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the selected 5 women leaders were the primary engagement mode for this study as it allowed the researcher to build immediate rapport and trust with the participant, allowing the researcher to capture

the most direct and honest responses, which were supported by participants' non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions (Opdenakker, 2006; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). Moreover, the semi-structured interview approach allows the researcher to guide the conversation with pre-set open-ended questions while having the flexibility to explore any emerging themes that arise during the interview, which is effective in understanding complex human experiences (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021; Bearman, 2019).

Interview questions were developed with a focus on the study's objectives, drawing on the existing literature. Participants were encouraged and invited to share their experiences and perspectives on education strategies and the challenges of gender equity and women empowerment within the Malaysian corporate landscape. Sample questions consist of their opinion on the existing educational strategies implemented in the corporate world, their perspective on these strategies' effectiveness on women empowerment and leadership, as well as the existing challenges faced when implementing effective educational strategies in the workplace.

Ethical considerations were prioritized during the research process to protect all participants' welfare, rights, and dignity. This study adhered to stringent ethical guidelines and measures to uphold the privacy and confidentiality of each participant. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at any time of the interview prior to each interview to ensure all participants feel respected and at ease.

For the data analysis phase, corporations that have been actively involved in implementing education strategies and initiatives to promote women's empowerment and leadership were selected. The selection criteria were inclusive of all industry fields, company size, and geographical locations. Private interviews were conducted as part of the data collection process to examine the objectives, strategies, obstacles encountered, and results of these initiatives.

This study will utilize thematic analysis, consisting of six-step processes outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to identify the common themes, patterns, and key findings related to educational strategies on women empowerment and their challenges, through the collection of qualitative data from private interviews conducted. The findings were connected to the existing theoretical frameworks, pertinent literature, and the greater social context in order to produce insightful knowledge about the factors that contribute to the success of women's empowerment efforts through educational strategies implementation. As a result, the key findings and conclusion from the study served as a basis for recommendations to advance women's empowerment and leadership in the Malaysian corporate sector.

4. Findings

Key findings of the interviews are presented in response to the research objective of this study.

The following are the four themes identified:

- 1) Insufficient Organizational Support and Underrepresentation of Women Leaders

- 2) Unconscious Gender Bias and Stereotypes
- 3) Resistance to Change
- 4) Work-Life Balance Challenges

4.1. Insufficient organizational support and underrepresentation of women leaders

Many of the respondents highlighted that an inadequate leadership development program, which fails to address the specific challenges women leaders may face, is a major obstacle hindering the implementation of effective educational strategies for women's leadership. This reflects limited organizational awareness and efforts to acknowledge the importance of implementing gender-specific strategies and addressing the special challenges women encounter in their leadership journeys. Moreover, the effectiveness of educational strategies is restricted when the organization does not prioritize the career advancement of their female employees which is evidenced by limited commitment, funding, and resources dedicated to these initiatives. The underrepresentation of women leaders in the workplace exacerbates this issue. A low ratio of women leaders limits the visibility of female role models and inspirations for junior women officers. This also indicates a lack of opportunity for mentorship and support network connections which are crucial for career development.

“Even when there are educational or leadership programs are put in place, they sometimes fail to address the specific needs of women. In my opinion, the main barriers that prevent women from advancing their careers in the corporate sector in Malaysia include a lack of networking opportunities. It is crucial that strong measures/policies are put in place to promote equal opportunities for women. These include transparent promotion processes, equal pay initiatives, and special training programs for managers that are tailored to the particular challenges and needs of women.” (Respondent 1)

“Inadequate program design as usually leadership programs only focus on the general crowd i.e. male and female. Not much to focus on regarding females or struggles” (Respondent 2)

“Lack of awareness within the organization body that such a strategy is a necessity to bring in more women in leadership roles, combined with a low ratio of existing women leaders and limited funding to plan and execute these educational strategies.” (Respondent 3)

“Additional barriers may include a lack of customized content, as educational programs that fail to tailor their content to unique challenges and requirements encountered by women may lack effectiveness, and inadequate funding and resources”. (Respondent 4)

Traditional leadership development programs that are designed for a general audience, are often insufficient to address the unique challenges faced by women in their career journeys (Ford et al., 2020; Loumpourdi, 2023; Meagher et al., 2022; Nash and Moore, 2020). This includes unconscious gender bias, double-bind dilemmas on leadership traits, and work-life balance issues, especially due to motherhood, which are not covered in the regular programs. Without properly

addressing these issues, the program will not be effective in promoting gender equality in the workplace.

The lack of gender-specific initiatives and programs with a low ratio of women leaders reflects the inadequate organizational awareness and commitment to structural change. Organizations tend to focus on short-term initiatives without follow-up or actional steps that are insufficient to address the deeper structural inequality issue within the organizational practices and culture (Azmat and Boring, 2020; Meagher et al., 2022; Wynn, 2020). To be able to address the inequality issue, requires a shift in management's attitude, redesigning organizational structure, and introducing gender equality processes and policies.

4.2. Unconscious gender bias and stereotypes

4 respondents highlighted that the unconscious gender biases and stereotypes, combined with a lack of awareness, are major barriers causing women to be overlooked for promotion and leadership opportunities despite their work abilities. Women are often perceived as less competent or committed compared to their male counterparts in the long term, especially once they are married. This perception is also influenced by the social and traditional expectation of motherhood which a woman should prioritize her family and take care of her child over her professional career. This creates a barrier to implementing educational strategies for women's career advancement as women are frequently judged on their role in the family rather than their professional achievements. This invisible bias and stereotyping not only affect the organizational culture but also cause women to doubt their capabilities. This internal self-doubt, fuelled by a lack of family and organization support and awareness, will negatively impact their job performance and worsen the gender stereotypes in the workplace. As a result, education strategies aimed at promoting gender equality are continuously undermined and deemed as non-essential, therefore creates a systemic barrier that prevent women from fully realizing their full potential in the workplace.

"In my opinion, the main barriers that prevent women from advancing their careers in the corporate sector in Malaysia are unconscious bias, stereotyping, and lack of networking opportunities. In addition, women are often overlooked for promotions and leadership positions because they are seen as less competent or committed compared to their male counterparts" (Respondent 1)

"Workplace culture and work-life balance struggles are the main barriers. A workplace culture that does not have transparent promotion is going to affect women's career advancement. In contrast, in my workplace, many women are able to hold high and important positions thanks to the transparent promotion practices in place" (Respondent 2)

The main barriers would be unconscious biases in the workplace, stereotypes, and societal expectations of the motherhood phase of a woman. (Respondent 3)
Similar to numerous other nations, women encounter various obstacles, including cultural and societal expectations, gender discrimination, self-doubt, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, and the gender pay gap, among others. This self-doubt arises not only due to an individual's upbringing but

also due to their workplace surroundings such as the combination of work-life imbalance and the social expectation on the responsibility of a woman as a mother. (Respondent 4)

Unconscious gender stereotypes and bias have been longstanding issues that SDG 4 and SDG 5 aim to address by emphasizing the importance of education, gender empowerment, and equality. Studies have revealed unconscious gender stereotypes has a negative impact on women's careers, particularly in the context of performance evaluation and career advancement (Greider et al., 2019; Heilman et al., 2023; Nair, 2023; Smith et al., 2018).

Women are often evaluated based on different standards as compared to their male counterparts and are criticized as aggressive when displaying dominant traits during decision-making and communication processes while this behavior is deemed acceptable when exhibited by men (Kim et al., 2020; Terrell, 2023; Williams and Tiedens, 2016). Moreover, the unconscious bias often stems from the traditional gender roles whereby male is viewed as the natural leaders while women are more suitable for supportive or secondary roles despite both displaying similar levels of work competencies and professionalism (Andrade, 2023)

Without raising awareness and identifying proper resolution to address unconscious gender biases and stereotypes in the workplace, it creates a work environment where women's contributions are undervalued, and their job accomplishments and qualifications are overlooked, as well as management's perception of their capabilities (Heilman et al., 2023; Itty et al., 2019; Walker, 2021). As a result, women's potential for professional development is permanently capped by a lower glass ceiling compared to their male counterparts. This leads to perpetuating gender inequality within the organization, where leadership potential is evaluated based on gender rather than individual capabilities.

4.3. Resistance to change

A few respondents recognized that resistance to change at both organizational and individual levels is a crucial barrier to the implementation of effective educational strategies for women's career advancement. On an organizational level, respondents highlighted a lack of commitment and prioritization from senior management has resulted in insufficient funding and resource allocation, therefore hindering the implementation of impactful educational strategies in the workplace. Moreover, the resistance to change at the individual level may be due to a lack of self-confidence and concerns about the potential additional workload due to the educational initiatives. Programs such as leadership development or coaching can be time-consuming, and participants may require taking up additional work tasks on top of their regular duties hence the resistance. Respondents revealed that resistance to change at both the organizational and individual levels often arise due to a familiarity with established work structures and practices. As the goal of educational strategies is to empower women for career advancement and to obtain leadership roles, the change may not be favorable to other stakeholders who are comfortable with the existing work dynamics. This resistance arises from a fear of upending the status quo where the role promotion and practices are more predictable. The

potential shift in power dynamics and authority, increased competition for work promotion and pay raises, or the redistribution of resources may create anxiety among those who gain from the current system.

I have encountered barriers such as a lack of commitment from senior management to prioritize some strategies, resulting in insufficient funding and resources. At the same time, there is resistance to change among some colleagues. (Respondent 1)

The main barrier will be a reluctance to embrace change. Both organizations and individuals often exhibit reluctance to alter established structures and practices. Such resistance can impede the implementation of innovative educational programs or strategies designed to advance women into leadership positions. (Respondent 3)

Throughout my experience in talent acquisition, where I have processed many leadership role applicants, I have observed that while there can be many barriers for women in leadership roles, the most important factors are the mindset of the person and support from the family. As I mentioned earlier, women can be leader in the company while managing their families just fine. Don't limit yourself. (Respondent 5)

Organizational and management resistance to change is the ultimate barrier preventing the corporate from achieving gender equality in leadership and the workplace (Cuthbert et al., 2023; Flood et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Williamson, 2019).

The concept of “oblique resistance” was introduced by Jones et al. (2020), which refers to the subtle and indirect form of resistance towards gender equality initiatives by distracting the organizational attention and effort from the goal of gender equality in the workplace. Resistances often arise due to the long-standing traditional norms and practices within the organization where men as seen as more qualified for leadership roles based on traditional norms (Baldner et al., 2021; Player et al., 2019; Williamson, 2019).

According to Lansu et al. (2020), management refuses to take ownership and responsibility in gender equality interventions as they don't see it as a necessity and often they view themselves as the change recipients rather than change agents. This resistance also arises as a defense mechanism whereby the existing management resists due to conflict of interest, particularly on the fear of increased competition and perceived the change as a threat to their authority and privilege (Flood et al., 2020; Williamson, 2019).

Moreover, traditional norms and practices lead to a rise in resistance to change among female employees, due to the concern about additional responsibilities or being judged as inadequate for leadership roles (Coleman, 2020; Jones et al., 2020). Often these concerns arise due to their lack of self-efficacy and confidence, which is an essential characteristic for a leadership role, therefore negatively impacting women's readiness to change and hindering their career advancement (Chen et al., 2021; Reisenhofer et al., 2019).

4.4. Work-life balance challenges

The struggle for work-life balance was stressed by the respondents during the private interviews. Among all the roles a woman can have in her life, the role and responsibilities of a married woman are particularly emphasized as it takes up substantial time and effort. Many respondents have emphasized the impact of these challenges on women's ability to discover their full potential in professional development while managing the responsibilities in their personal lives. Suggestions given include flexible work arrangements in terms of time and location, childcare support, and family support are required to overcome this barrier and support women for their career advancement.

Workplace culture and work-life balance struggles are the main barriers. My suggestion is to have flexible work arrangements and childcare support to overcome these barriers. This is most effective as it addresses practical concerns women face and allows women to still assume leadership and perform at work without having to choose between career and personal responsibilities. (Respondent 2)

Similar to numerous other nations, women encounter various obstacles, including cultural and societal expectations, gender discrimination, self-doubt, difficulties in achieving work-life balance, and the gender pay gap, among others. (Respondent 4)

One of the barriers for women in obtaining leadership roles is the support from the family, where both husband and wife need to acknowledge that family responsibilities are shared. It's not just the wife who needs to stay back to manage the household. Flexible work arrangements, whether in terms of time or location, can make a significant difference! This flexibility allows us to achieve our best at work without missing out on precious time with our families. Additionally, it helps us be more productive by saving time that would otherwise be lost in traffic jams! (Respondent 5)

Studies highlight the struggle of balancing professional and personal responsibilities has been a critical barrier to career development and advancement for many women around the world (Boakye et al., 2021; Essandoh et al., 2023; Mowpia, 2023; Shabir and Gani, 2020). Women struggle to maintain the necessary focus and time for professional development while managing household duties. They are often expected to be the family caregivers, traditionally and culturally, even when they are engaged in full-time employment. Therefore, to support women for their professional growth, overall well-being, and their work contribution to the organization, work-life balance practices are required to be implemented in the workplace. Organizational work-life balance practices include flexible work arrangements in terms of time and location, virtual work communication, childcare benefits, and the implementation of family-friendly policies and programs in the organization (Boakye et al., 2021). According to Essandoh et al. (2023), these practices have a positive impact on women's career goal progression, professional development, and promotion speed. However, having these practices solely is not sufficient for women's career advancement as they do not directly contribute to

leadership skill development and strategic competencies that are necessary for leadership roles.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed numerous obstacles women encounter when implementing educational strategies that empower them towards their career advancement in the corporate sector of Malaysia. Through private interviews with five women leaders, several main obstacles have been identified which are insufficient organizational support toward achieving gender equality and underrepresentation of women leaders/unconscious gender bias and stereotypes in the workplace/resistance to change on both organizational and personal level/work-life balance challenges for women.

Among all the challenges, insufficient organizational support with the underrepresentation of women leaders is the most critical issue in Malaysia's corporate sector, according to the respondents.

These barriers highlighted the crucial need for comprehensive organizational reforms, which requires not only policy changes but also a significant cultural shifts within the organizations to support women's career advancement. Addressing these challenges requires consistent effort sustained over time to ensure the complete elimination of gender inequality in the workplace. Achieving this will enable the implementation of effective educational strategies that empower women towards their career progression and contribute to the attainment of SDG 4 and SDG 5 in Malaysia.

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