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Strategic empowerment of women in Malaysia's corporate sector: A phenomenological study

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to explore the strategies of empowering women in Malaysia's corporate sector. Understanding these strategies of empowering women was vital as it helped the organization to implement appropriate strategies and foster policy towards engaging and empowering more women to progress in corporate ladder. The study utilized qualitative method which was guided by phenomenological inquiry to understand the challenges of empowering women in corporate sectors. The finding strategies of empowering women in corporate sector which consisted of: flexible workforce/work life balance initiatives, review existing policy and gap/anti-discrimination policy/Supportive family policies, leadership development and mentorship/visible role, career development opportunity, gender awareness/sensitivity training, diverse hiring practice, inclusive organizational culture and supportive infrastructure. The study depended mainly on women leaders as a primary source of data. The experiences shared may be different from each other based on their role and positions. The study was appropriate for corporate sectors and human resource management to develop policies and procedures that were needed to empower women within organization and corporate sectors. The strategies revealed in the finding enlightened the effective approaches to help women advance within corporate sectors. The study had its unique value through its focus on implementing phenomenology inquiry to explore the strategies towards empowering women in Malaysia's corporate sector. Qualitative method granted an immersed exploration of perceptions and experience of women pertaining to empowerment strategies. The strategies provided significant understanding for corporate sector, policy makes as well as Human Resource Department to propose effective methods to foster gender equality and empowering women in Malaysia's corporate settings.

Keywords: women's empowerment; gender equality; phenomenology inquiry; empowerment strategies; human resource management

1. Introduction

Promoting women's empowerment in corporate sector necessitates a thorough strategy ahead of merely enhancing women representation in higher roles. Genuine empowerment intends to assimilate women entirely into organizational leadership, permitting them to structure policies, induce corporate culture, and crusade strategic decisions (Pontefract, 2024). Women's potential will be limited if they are not given equal power, which will impede organizational innovation, creativity, and economic advancement. Furthermore, a lack of female empowerment may result in the underutilization of women's distinct perspectives and leadership styles, which will subsequently limit the opportunities for varied decision-making and efficient

problem-solving. This calls for a dedication to tearing down the obstacles that women frequently encounter on the way to becoming leaders, such as unconscious prejudices, a lack of access to vital networks, and the difficulty of striking a balance between work and life (Pontefract, 2024).

Companies can gain from a wider range of insights and experiences by fostering an environment that values women's leadership styles and contributions. This leads to more creative and efficient decision-making (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023).

Empowerment is about creating an ecosystem that supports women's professional growth and personal well-being in the workplace. This includes designing policies that address women's unique challenges, such as gender pay gaps and career progression barriers (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021). For example, Malaysia's National Policy on Women has been formed to foster gender equality, yet significant gaps remain in effective implementation and cultural transformation (Mahmood, 2021). Women will continue to experience injustices that hinder their progress if these systematic barriers are not removed, which will lower their participation rates in the labor force and diminish their economic contributions. Women's underrepresentation in leadership positions, economic inequality, and gender inequality can all be sustained by not empowering them, which ultimately impedes the advancement of society. It also involves creating a supportive culture that actively combats discrimination and harassment, ensuring all employees feel safe and respected (Pontefract, 2024). Empowering women in the workplace means acknowledging and leveraging their strengths, providing opportunities for skill development, and facilitating access to mentorship and sponsorship (Galsanjigmed and Sekiguchi, 2023). This helps women thrive professionally and creates a more dynamic, collaborative, and productive work environment (Pontefract, 2024).

Furthermore, encouraging diversity and inclusion at all levels is closely related to empowering women in the corporate sector. This covers a range of perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds, as well as gender diversity. International organizations, such as UN Women and McKinsey and Company, have been recognized as successful strategies from several countries that emphasized the significance of legislative support, corporate commitment, and mentorship programs to promote gender equality in leadership roles (Goh and Lim, 2022; McKinsey, 2023). Companies can unleash the full potential of their workforce and foster creativity, innovation, and resilience by putting a high priority on fostering a culture that respects and values diversity (Ibarra et al., 2013).

Companies can also adopt targeted strategies to empower women, like work-life integration initiatives, leadership development programs designed specifically for women, and transparent promotion criteria (Johnson et al., 2023). These initiatives contribute to ensuring that women succeed and flourish in leadership roles in addition to helping them attain these positions.

Grant Thornton's 2023 International Business Report (IBR) highlights sluggish global progress in women's representation in senior leadership, with only a marginal increase of 0.5% since 2022. In Malaysia, the percentage of women in senior management positions remains stagnant at 40%, consistent with the previous year. Despite a growing number of educated women, their promotion to senior roles remains challenging, constituting less than 7% in both public and private sectors.

Gender disparities persist, with women earning 70.6% to 83.2% of men's median earnings, necessitating greater gender equality in leadership. The corporate world in Malaysia, despite apparent strides in gender equality, still grapples with the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles. This imbalance not only hinders innovation and growth but also results in a considerable talent drain. The 30% gender networks and commendable, falls short due to complex roadblocks such as feminist conventions, limited social networks, and flawed decision-making processes. This study delves into these contradictory themes, exposing systems that undervalue female talent and emphasizing the need to dismantle barriers rooted in societal norms and inadequate support networks.

Beyond the numerical deficit in leadership roles, the marginalization of women's viewpoints and untapped potential represents a significant loss to creativity and strategic vision. The study seeks to amplify the unheard voices and comprehend the real struggles women face in navigating Malaysia's corporate landscape. By shedding light on these issues, the aim is to find practical solutions, fostering a truly equitable and inclusive environment where all, irrespective of gender, contribute harmoniously. Motherhood becomes a hindrance for many Malaysian women, forcing a choice between career advancement and family responsibilities due to societal pressures and inadequate support systems. This results in a substantial loss of talent, and closing the gender gap in labor force participation could lead to a 22% increase in Malaysia's GDP, emphasizing the need to eliminate the "mommy track" and establish supportive work environments. Deep-seated biases and stereotypes towards women persist in Malaysia's corporate culture, influencing decision-making despite existing laws and quotas. These invisible barriers hinder career advancement, fostering a hostile atmosphere that evaluates women based on outdated notions. Legislative changes alone are insufficient; concerted efforts are needed to create inclusive workplaces valuing diversity. While Malaysia has implemented commendable policies like the 30% quota, a gap exists between policy and practice. Understanding the obstacles to effective policy execution, including bureaucratic hurdles and cultural challenges, is crucial to ensuring meaningful changes for women in the corporate landscape.

The purpose of the study is to the strategies toward empowering women's participation in the workforce in the Malaysian corporate sector. By conducting a comprehensive analysis, this research aims to contribute to the knowledge base on gender equality and women's empowerment, provide insights into effective strategies and interventions, and highlight the economic benefits of women's empowerment in the corporate sector. Consequently, the study will be targeted to inform organizations, policymakers, and stakeholders about the importance of gender equality and provide evidence-based recommendations for fostering women's empowerment, enhancing their participation, and driving stronger economic outcomes in Malaysia.

This study's primary objective is to investigate how women are strategically empowered in Malaysia's corporate sector. It does this by identifying and putting into practice strategies that can improve women's participation and advancement in leadership positions. In addition to evaluating how supportive policies, mentorship programs, and work-life integration initiatives contribute to women's experiences in

the workplace, this study examined the influence of organizational culture and societal norms on women's experiences in the workplace. Through the examination of successful case studies and the collection of perspectives from working women in a range of industries, the research seeks to create actionable suggestions for organizations and legislators to promote an inclusive atmosphere that not only empowers women but also stimulates economic development.

Accordingly, the key research question guiding this study is: What strategies can be implemented to empower women in the Malaysian corporate sector and promote their advancement in leadership positions?

The study relies on interviews with professional women across various industries in Malaysia, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the entire population of female professionals. Certain industries or regions may be overrepresented or underrepresented, leading to potential biases in the findings. While the qualitative approach allows for in-depth exploration, the findings may not be generalizable to all female professionals in Malaysia or to other cultural contexts. The specific degrees and challenges uncovered may be unique to the participants and may not be applicable to a broader population. In addition, conducting qualitative interviews and thematic analysis is time-consuming, and the study may be limited by time constraints in terms of the number of interviews conducted or the depth of analysis performed. Accessing a diverse group of professional women for interviews may pose challenges, particularly if certain industries or organizations are reluctant to participate or if participants are hesitant to share their experiences candidly. Consequently, the study may not capture the long-term effects of existing approaches to women's empowerment, as the focus is primarily on current experiences and perceptions rather than tracking changes over time.

2. Underpinning theory

2.1. Social role theory

The study applied Social Role theory as its theoretical framework to explore the strategies to empower women in Malaysia's corporate sector. Social Role theory has been purported by Eagly and Wood (1999). According to them, societal expectations and gender stereotypes shape individual roles and attitudes in the workplace. The traditional gender roles which assign specific attributes to women, most of the time place them in a supportive position with men taking up the leadership roles (Eagly, 1987; Eagly and Crowley, 1986). This type of societal norm can create barriers to women's career progressions and limit their participation in leadership roles (Koenig and Eagly, 2014).

Nevertheless, understanding the consequences of social role theory is essential to recognize how societal beliefs and stereotypes impact women's professional opportunities. Social role theory provides a holistic framework for assessing strategies aimed at empowering women by challenging and reshaping these traditional roles. The theory highlights the value of redefining organizational dynamics to adopt an environment where women can succeed and attain leadership positions.

2.2. Strategies and interventions towards empowering women and promoting their participation in the workforce

2.2.1. Flexible work arrangements

Recognizing the challenge of work-life balance, especially for women who shoulder a sizable portion of caregiving responsibilities, flexible work arrangements emerge as a crucial strategy for empowerment (Subramaniam, 2011). By offering options such as telecommuting, flexible hours, and part-time work, corporations can create a more inclusive workplace that accommodates the diverse needs of their employees (Kossek et al., 2021). This flexibility enables women to remain in the workforce and pursue career advancement without sacrificing their personal and family commitments (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020). Mothers often face career setbacks due to flexibility stigma, as they predominantly opt for part-time arrangements, while fathers, who utilize flexitime and teleworking more, experience fewer negative career repercussions (Chung and van der Lippe, 2020).”The working group participants believe that women generally carry a greater burden of household and family responsibilities and frequently spend disproportionate amounts of time doing unpaid care work in addition to their formal employment, leading to difficulty with work-life balance,” (Harrison et al., 2022).

2.2.2. Mentorship, role models and social networking

Access to gender-specific guidance and support is deemed essential for effective leadership, as highlighted by Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016). Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017) found that female mentors play a pivotal role in supporting the career aspirations of women engineers by fostering a sense of belonging and confidence. Moreover, mentoring by top leadership figures has been shown to enhance organizational effectiveness (Moore and Wang, 2017).

Role models are crucial for shaping social identities within the workplace (Sealy and Singh, 2008). The social identity theory of leadership becomes particularly relevant in the context of mentorship, where leaders and followers develop a shared sense of identity (Steffens et al., 2021). Mentors can exert influence when they share a social identity with their mentees. Minority groups, such as women leaders, can leverage social identity theory to confront material and economic disadvantages (Meyer et al., 2016). Additionally, a positive social gender identity has been shown to reduce conflict and stress while increasing life satisfaction and leadership motivation among female leaders (Karelaila and Guillén, 2014).

2.2.3. Training and career development support

Women strive to optimize their professional potential while juggling the demands of work and personal life. However, they frequently encounter obstacles that hinder their advancement toward desired career positions. In such situations, various forms of support can facilitate their progress. One effective strategy is to seek guidance from a suitable mentor who can provide valuable insights and assistance. A competent mentor can play a crucial role in helping women navigate these challenges. However, identifying an appropriate mentor within the workplace can pose an additional challenge for women leaders, who may be wary of

stereotypical mentor characteristics. Nonetheless, having a mentor can significantly enhance career growth, skill development, and overall job satisfaction, thereby contributing to improved employee retention rates (Elias, 2018). Moreover, a mentor is likely to facilitate the recognition of women's peers and colleagues (Mate et al., 2019). Effective mentoring has the potential to cultivate women's leadership abilities. While mentoring may not directly alter the existing organizational structure, it can promote social change and support within the workplace (De Vries, 2010; Linehan and Walsh, 1999; Ragins et al., 2017). Research suggests that mentoring not only benefits personal career advancement but also yields positive outcomes for organizations (McKeen and Bujaki, 2007; Ragins and Cotton, 1999). Consequently, mentoring as a tool for enhancing career success has garnered significant attention in research circles (Abalkhail and Allan, 2015; Woolnough and Davidson, 2007).

2.2.4. Inclusive hiring and promotion practices

To combat gender bias and ensure a more equitable corporate environment, the adoption of inclusive hiring and promotion practices is essential (Helman et al., 2020). This includes implementing unbiased recruitment processes, establishing clear promotion criteria, and ensuring diversity in hiring panels (Helman et al., 2020). Such practices help increase the representation of women at all levels of the corporate hierarchy and foster a culture of fairness and equality within the organization (McKinsey and Company, 2022). "Companies can take steps to more clearly signal their expectations and reward results, such as sharing well-being and diversity metrics with all employees and publicly acknowledging managers who stand out for their efforts to support employees and foster inclusion on their teams," (McKinsey and Company, 2022).

2.2.5. Policy advocacy and implementation

The effectiveness of policies promoting women's empowerment is contingent upon their robust advocacy and implementation (Lwamba et al., 2022). It is crucial for corporations, alongside government bodies, to advocate for and implement policies that support gender equality (Simone, 2023). This includes enacting and enforcing laws on equal pay, anti-discrimination, and harassment. Employers benefit from gender equality policies by fostering a discrimination-free environment, enhancing productivity, reducing turnover, and attracting top talent, ultimately resulting in long-term gains for the organization (Simone, 2023). Furthermore, corporations should actively participate in policy dialogues and contribute to developing policies that address the specific challenges women face in the corporate sector (OECD, 2020). "For instance, in Germany where a 2015 law introduced a quota of 30% with a deadline of 2016, women's representation on boards increased from 16% in 2011 to 35% in 2018," (OECD, 2020).

2.2.6. Creating supportive corporate cultures

At the core of women's empowerment strategies is transforming corporate cultures into more supportive and inclusive environments (Purnamawati and Utama, 2019). This entails addressing and dismantling gender stereotypes, promoting gender diversity in leadership, and creating awareness programs to educate employees about the importance of gender equality (Lwamba et al., 2022). A supportive corporate

culture values diversity encourages open dialogue on gender issues, and recognises the contributions of all employees, irrespective of gender (Purnamawati and Utama, 2019). “Protecting women and girls’ human rights, safety, physical and mental health and security, promotion of their Socioeconomic recovery and increased participation in decision-making processes and responses related to conflict or fragility are key processes that lead to overall progress towards gender equality and women’s empowerment,” (Lwamba et al., 2022).

The strategies for women’s empowerment in Malaysia’s corporate landscape are multifaceted and require a concerted effort from various stakeholders, including corporations, government, and civil society. Leadership development, flexible work arrangements, inclusive hiring practices, policy advocacy, and the creation of supportive corporate cultures are among the key strategies that can significantly impact women’s empowerment. By implementing these strategies, Malaysia can make significant strides toward creating a more inclusive and equitable corporate environment, enabling women to achieve their full potential and contribute more effectively to the corporate sector.

Notwithstanding this positive revelation of women empowerment strategies, the literature shows significant gaps in the effectiveness of these strategies in the Malaysian context. Although vast research on general empowerment strategies exists, there is inadequate empirical evidence weighing their implementation and impact on women in Malaysian corporations. Furthermore, studies often neglect the specific cultural and societal aspects that may affect the effectiveness of these strategies in different circumstances. A quiet number of studies focus mainly on Western backgrounds, which often fail to acknowledge the unique cultural, social, and organizational dynamics present in Malaysia (Goh and Lim, 2022). For example, although mentorship and sponsorship programs have been acknowledged as effective tools to empower women (Baker et al., 2021; Ibarra et al., 2013), their cultural adaptation and success in the Malaysian corporate environment remain largely new.

Apart from that, very few studies focused on the differential impacts of empowerment strategies across various sectors in Malaysia. Despite the study done by McKinsey (2023) which shows employing diversity and inclusion strategies in organizations can significantly increase women’s representation in leadership roles; nevertheless, the details of how these strategies transform into long-term career development for Malaysian women are yet to be explored. Additionally, the study is also insufficient in terms of longitudinal studies that explore the continuous effects of these strategies on women’s career paths, leaving a critical gap in understanding how empowerment initiatives can be effectively implemented and evaluated over time. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing a comprehensive framework for women’s empowerment that is culturally appropriate to the Malaysian context.

3. Materials and methods

This research mainly focused on gender equity and women empowerment in the Malaysian corporate sector. Understanding this multifaceted research setting is crucial for examining the intricacies of gender equity and empowerment and fostering strategies to promote equality within the Malaysian corporate landscape. A

qualitative case study methodology by Creswell (2014), was employed to explore gender equity and women empowerment based on this context. This approach permitted an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real surroundings, providing detailed insights into the complex dynamics of gender within corporate settings (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Savenye and Robinson, 2013).

Qualitative research, characterized by its exploratory nature, adopts an interpretative and naturalistic approach to understanding social phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This method highlights the profound impact of researchers immersing themselves in natural settings and interpreting them based on the meanings participants attribute to their experiences (Creswell, 2007). Case study research requires comprehensive descriptions and analyses of specific phenomena, such as programs, institutions, individuals, or social units (Merriam, 1998). The selection of cases is influenced by various factors, including the researcher's expertise in the study and the philosophical stance guiding the research (Duff, 2008).

This study precisely focused on women in corporate roles within the Malaysian corporate sector, as these women actively contribute in the corporate settings and possess firsthand knowledge and experiences of the challenges and opportunities encountered by female professionals. They exhibited a profound understanding of gender inequalities and barriers to advancement, providing valuable evidence and perspectives on gender equity and women empowerment in this context (Dörnyei, 2007).

Participants were purposely selected through purposive sampling techniques, a method in qualitative research for identifying individuals who can provide valuable understandings (Ames et al., 2019; Palinkas et al., 2015). This technique is designed to select individuals with significant knowledge or experience relevant to the study being conducted (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011; Patton, 2002). According to Creswell (2014), the recommended number of participants for a case study typically ranges from four to five.

To begin participant selection for the study, approval was obtained from relevant authorities within corporate organizations. Department heads were contacted for recommendations of exemplary women professionals in corporate roles. It was anticipated these authorities could provide valuable insights into the contributions and achievements of women within the corporate sector. Based on the suggestion, potential participants were compiled, and each individual was contacted to explain the study's purpose and request their consent for participation. Once consent was secured, interviews were scheduled at convenient locations and times for the participants.

The study aimed to provide clear information regarding the number of women selected for interviews, the organizations they represented, the success rate of the interviews, and the method of conducting interviews, whether electronically or face-to-face. Furthermore, details on the timeline of the interviews were to be specified. By addressing these gaps, the research sought to present a thorough understanding of the methodology employed in examining gender equity and women empowerment within Malaysia's corporate sector.

4. Data collection

Data collection consists of a combination of general and specific interviews. Primarily, general interviews directed towards gathering demographic details, such as gender, age, and professional experience, to ensure participants could provide relevant insights. This is followed with specific interviews delved into participants' views on the strategy to empower women in the corporate sector. Employing topical questions and informal interviewing techniques, as per Moustakas' (1994) guidelines on interview types, facilitated rich data collection.

Interview questions were designed based on existing literature and tailored to match the study's focus. Respondents were invited to share their experiences and opinions on women empowerment within the Malaysian corporate settings. Sample questions included investigation about the strategies that they perceive organization could implement towards empowering women in corporate sectors.

Ethical considerations were essential throughout the study to ensure respondents felt comfortable and regarded during interviews. Procedures were applied to maintain participants' privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent was requested from all participants. Given the study's location in Malaysia, adherence to local ethical guidelines was significant.

For the data analysis phase, corporate sectors actively involved in implementing initiatives to promote women's empowerment in Malaysia's business sector were determined. The selection criteria encompassed diversity in industries, organizational size, geographical location, and demonstrated commitment to gender diversity. Data collection consists of interviews focused at exploring strategies and implementation processes of these efforts.

Thematic analysis was employed to recognize common themes, patterns, and key findings pertaining to women's empowerment, originated from interviews. Data clarification involved connecting insights to current theoretical frameworks, relevant literature, and the broader social context to generate meaningful insights and understandings about the strategies contributing to the success of women's empowerment efforts. Assumptions drawn from data analysis emphasized lessons learned from strategies and effective practices potentially aiding as a basis for proposals to foster women's participation and empowerment in the Malaysian business sector.

5. Finding and discussion

The findings of this study are structured around the primary research objectives and are categorized into eight key themes.

The following five themes have been identified.

- Flexible workforce/work life balance initiatives
- Review of Existing Policies: Anti-Discrimination and Supportive Family Policies
- Leadership development and mentorship/visible role
- Career development opportunity
- Gender awareness/sensitivity training

- Diverse hiring practice
- Inclusive Organizational culture
- Supportive infrastructure

5.1. Flexible workforce and work life balance schemes

Most of the women leaders confided about their experience of facing women who struggle to balance their career obligation with family responsibilities which will consequently trigger burnout and stress. As such they have emphasized the importance of easing these challenges by implementing flexible work arrangements such as flexible work hours, work from home and fostering the work-life balance program in the organization. In addition, implementing the suggested strategies also enable women in corporate sector to better handle their dual roles, enhance satisfaction and eliminate turnover due to burnout. Ultimately understanding the unique need of women with the corporate sector enrich overall performance, productivity and sustain valuable talent.

“Workplace flexibility is reshaping how women balance work, family, and personal growth. Employers must prioritize workforce needs, encouraging women to pursue careers alongside motherhood. This allows productivity to increase as it could minimize inefficient time management due to traffic congestion (Respondent 1).

We should introduce and normalize sick days specifically for women’s health issues and provide flexible working hours to accommodate childcare responsibilities. This will help create a more supportive work environment for our female employees” (Respondent 2).

“I think, women should be given flexible work hours as most of the family responsibilities will fall under them and at the same time they need to focus on their career. Having the flexible work hour enhance their level of satisfaction and they can work without stress and burnout” (Respondent 3).

“Women can more successfully manage their work and family commitments by encouraging companies to implement flexible work arrangements including telecommuting, flexible hours, and parental leave policies” (Respondent 4).

According to Singley and Hynes (2005), flexible working arrangements can serve as a valuable resource that enables workers, particularly women, to adjust their work schedules to accommodate their family obligations. Flexibility in work schedules enables mothers to continue working after giving birth (Chung and Van der Horst, 2018b) and to continue working in jobs requiring a lot of human capital during periods when family demands are high (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019). Because it enables women to maintain both, this capability may raise women’s satisfaction with work-life balance.

5.2. Review of existing policies: Anti-Discrimination and supportive family policies

Women leaders emphasized on the importance of implementing policies supporting maternity leave and work life balance. According to them organization should not penalize women for taking maternity leave but instead provide encouraging environment that values their role.

“Policies relating to gender equality, harassment, and discrimination need to be reviewed. Identification of gaps where new policies will be required or where existing ones need improvement is necessary. This could be internal policy too” (Respondent 1).

“It is important for corporations to develop policies that support family responsibilities, such as flexible working hours and childcare support. These policies are significant for allowing women to thrive in their careers” (Respondent 2).

“It’s essential to regularly evaluate the effectiveness of our empowerment strategies. We need to use metrics such as employee satisfaction, retention rates, and performance outcomes to refine and improve our policies continuously” (Respondent 3).

According to Rahman (2019), it’s critical to create and implement suitable anti-discrimination initiatives that educate staff members on how to comprehend and comply with the company’s anti-discrimination policy. In general, these initiatives ought to emphasize the company’s objective of doing away with discrimination and, in addition, support the company’s core beliefs of professionalism and respect for one another in the workplace. As a result, employers ought to take prudent measures to modify working conditions for their staff members and refrain from discriminating. The designed policy must also be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that employer and employee rights are upheld in accordance with business performance.

Women respondents also emphasized the importance of policy enforcement and ensure the organization to take responsibility of ensuring real progress in women’s empowerment. This includes regular reviews and penalties for non-compliance.

“For example, we need to review our insurance policies to ensure equal benefits for all employees. Historically, there have been disparities, such as men being able to nominate spouses while women couldn’t. It’s crucial that we address these inequities to support our female employees equally” (Respondent 4).

“Our current policies need to be re-engineered to reflect the unique needs of women in the workplace. This includes updating our code of conduct, guidelines, and practices to ensure they are inclusive and supportive” (Respondent 5).

5.3. Leadership development and mentorship as a visible role

As mentioned by the women respondent exercising leadership development and mentorship have a potential to inspire and guide career drives of other women with the corporate. Focusing on women leadership development initiatives assist the gap in representation and assist women towards overcoming the challenges being in male-dominated corporate settings.

“Leadership development initiatives should be designed to empower women by enhancing their skills, building their confidence, and preparing them for senior roles. These programs must focus on providing women with the tools and networks necessary to navigate and succeed in a predominantly male-dominated corporate environment” (Respondent 1).

“Mentorship is one of the most important ways of empowering women. It provides support and the chance to develop abilities in problem-solving, thus

empowering women to handle challenges. Guidance from senior leaders (women) is encouraging to a certain extent” (Respondent 2).

“Mentorship is one of the most important ways of empowering women. It provides support and the chance to develop abilities in problem-solving, thus empowering women to handle challenges. Guidance from senior leaders (women) is encouraging to a certain extent” (Respondent 3).

Studies show that mentoring boosts women’s self-esteem and assists in the development of critical abilities, which promotes greater career success and job satisfaction. As stated by Dreher and Ash (2011) women who involve in mentoring relationships are more likely to receive promotions and salary increases compared to those who do not have mentors, demonstrating the substantial benefits of such partnerships. Stronger and more significant relationships are formed through same-gender mentoring, which is especially effective (Castaño et al., 2010; Moody and Aldercotte, 2019; Palmer and Jones, 2019). Women in leadership positions inspire others by setting an example, breaking down barriers, and pursuing comparable goals. Mentoring helps women overcome obstacles in the workplace and gives them access to the networks, resources, and perspectives needed to grow in their careers. Furthermore, women who receive mentoring experience increased motivation and a sense of worth, which leads to greater job satisfaction (Blau et al., 2010; Ginther and Na, 2021; Risner et al., 2020).

5.4. Career development opportunity

Few women leaders revealed on the significance of providing well-defined training programs or relevant workshop that customized towards enhancing their skills as well as to advance their profession. The training is also said to be beneficial to develop the women’s leadership and managerial capabilities apart from improving technical skill.

“Granting structured career development opportunities is important for the development of women in our corporate. Some of the initiatives that can be implemented include access to training programs, workshops, and professional development courses that help women develop their skills and plan for leadership responsibilities. Without these chances women may find it challenging to progress in their profession” (Respondent 2).

“Ongoing training programs on gender equality and appropriate workplace behavior are important. These sessions will help change mindsets and foster a more respectful and inclusive environment” (Respondent 2).

“Chances for career development should be available to all specifically women. Organization needs to make sure that women can access prominent projects, leadership ranks, and networking opportunities on an equal basis with men. Their experience and visibility within the company are enhanced as a result” (Respondent 3).

Bodalina and Mestry (2020) postulate that women can develop to senior positions with instructional leadership, professional learning communities, integrated quality management systems, mentoring, and coaching. Redefining women’s mindsets about their potential, social support, new business competencies, a trusting

environment, and other aspects are crucial in women's career success and leadership development (Lämsä and Savela, 2019).

5.5. Gender awareness and sensitivity training

Women respondents emphasized the importance of recurring training programs dedicated for gender equality at workplace. Providing these training according to the women leaders will create profound impacts towards shifting mindset and fostering more inclusive and courteous working environment in the corporate setting. Consequently, providing ongoing training and awareness will assist employees to understand well the importance of gender equality and embrace behavior that supports more inclusive workplace.

“Regular training programs on gender equality and appropriate workplace behavior are essential. These sessions will help change mindsets and foster a more respectful and inclusive environment” (Respondent 1).

“Promoting gender equality in the workplace requires public education as well as the confrontation of gender preconceptions and biases. This entails questioning conventional gender norms and expectations as well as promoting awareness of the advantages of gender diversity” (Respondent 2).

“Gender awareness and sensitivity training is important to create a well-inclusive organizational culture by adopting knowledge, understanding and value among employees. This training will facilitate employees identify and challenge stereotypes, biases, and discriminatory conducts, eventually contributing to a workplace whereby individuals feel valued and respected. By stimulating awareness and sensitivity, organizations can foster a culture of inclusivity and diversity that benefits everyone” (Respondent 3).

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5.6. Diverse hiring practice

Women respondents emphasized on the profound impacts of diverse hiring practices in order to ensure the inclusive and equal workplace. In addition, they have also discussed the importance of diversity that should be assimilated into hiring practice to ensure a diverse pool of candidates and to promote gender equality. According to their viewpoint hiring practice in an organization should be accompanied with a vigorous support system that will nurture constant development for all employees, make certain that they feel valued and involved.

“So, it starts from attracting them, attracting the right people, you know, and then developing them sustainably” (Respondent 1).

“I would say the Diversity and Inclusion initiatives should start from the recruitment phase. It is important to ensure diverse pool of candidates which include women. This should be followed with onboarding, whereby we should assimilate Diversity and inclusion principles to underline the significance of inclusivity right from the start” (Respondent 2).

“We must ensure that our promotion and recruitment processes are transparent and fair. Women should have equal opportunities to advance in their careers, and we need to actively work to eliminate any biases that may exist” (Respondent 3).

HR regulations and organizational structures need to change in order to lessen gender discrimination and empower women in the workplace. To alter the makeup of their workforce, organizations should create diversity initiatives that focus on attracting, retaining, and advancing underrepresented groups (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). A balanced representation is ensured by keeping track of and monitoring the number of qualified applicants, those hired or promoted, and encouraging inclusive practices by offering bonuses to managers who hire diverse staff (Cleveland et al., 2000; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). Without organizational commitment and a supportive work environment, short-term diversity targets are ineffective (Heilman et al., 1992, 1997). According to van Knippenberg et al. (2004), diversity initiatives should be in line with business strategies in order to promote innovation and better serve a variety of markets.

5.7. Inclusive organizational culture

The women respondent highlighted on the benefits of supporting an inclusive culture within the corporate settings. As mentioned by them giving priority for diversity and inclusion enable women to feel valued, respected and empowered towards success within the workplace setting. In addition, women respondent also emphasized the importance of engaging women employees in open discussion about diversity, equity and inclusion which will consequently help them to categorize area of improvement. Ultimately the respondents stressed on the importance of specific techniques that is aligned with company values which assist women employees to take initiative and enhance a respectful, cooperative culture. This strategy guarantees that initiatives to support inclusivity are important and successful, and lead to a more parallel workplace culture.

“Understanding the existing culture is very important. This means the assessment of how gender roles are currently perceived and acted upon within the organization. A strategy that fits into the organizational culture or tactfully challenges it to evolve will be more likely to succeed” (Respondent 1).

“Identifying and accepting our corporate culture is essential when implementing inclusion tactics. Open discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion provide us with insightful information that helps us create customized strategies that are effective and relevant while also meeting the particular needs and values of our organization” (Respondent 2).

“It’s critical to cultivate inclusive and encouraging work environments that embrace gender equality and diversity. This entails supporting programs for diversity and inclusion, addressing unconscious prejudice, and giving women networking and mentoring opportunities” (Respondent 3).

According to Purnamawati and Utama (2019), the fundamental element of women’s empowerment tactics involves converting corporate cultures into ones that are more encouraging and welcoming. This means creating awareness campaigns to inform staff members of the value of gender equality, addressing and dismantling

gender stereotypes, and encouraging gender diversity in leadership roles (Lwamba et al., 2022). She also added that welcoming workplace culture celebrates diversity, promotes gender equality, and acknowledges the contributions of all workers, regardless of gender.

Women respondent also recommended an actionable approach to encourage inclusive organization culture which is to transform available spaces at workplace into childcare facilities. Offering this facility allows organization to be promote a more inclusive and family-friendly work environment. Ultimately the approach recognizes the challenges faced by working mothers and precisely focus them, promoting gender equality and employee well-being within the organization.

“One strategy the company can implement is to employ transforming available spaces within the workplace into childcare facilities. This could include allocated rooms for breastfeeding and storing breast milk, like the practices executed by some progressive law firms. By delivering these facilities, organizations exhibit a commitment to supporting working mothers and creating a more inclusive and family-friendly work culture and environment” (Respondent 4).

5.8. Flexible HR strategies for employee well-being

Few women leaders emphasized on the crucial role Human Resource Department play towards addressing women employee’s need. As stated by women leaders HR can enhance employee satisfaction by offering individualized options in addition to standard benefits. This approach promotes adaptability, which is essential for empowering women in the workforce. Benefits that are altered to each employee’s preferences can contribute to a more friendly workplace where women feel encouraged to balance their personal and professional lives.

“It is important for the Human Resource Department to play a bigger part in optimizing resources and understanding the complexities of employees. Outsourcing HR functions may not fully seize employees’ needs and preferences. Flexible benefits and perks, devised for individual satisfaction and health indicators can enhance employee satisfaction and well-being. Presenting possibilities beyond usual benefits like medical insurance allows employees to choose what suits them best, promoting a culture of flexibility and empowerment” (Respondent 1).

Women leaders also emphasized the importance of HR in treating workers fairly and recognizing their abilities. Challenges such as inflation and stagnant pay are particularly common for women as stated by the respondents, but they are reluctant to speak out about them. As stated by Baker (2020), wage stagnation has inexplicably affected women, particularly during economic crises. This stagnation limits their financial independence apart from exacerbating their hesitancy to negotiate for higher wages. (Kahn and Lang, 2018) In addition stressed that inflation tends to weaken the purchasing power of wages, further wrenching women who may already be earning less than their male counterparts. This economic pressure obviously can inhibit women from voicing their compensation matters. As such HR is responsible for thwarting talent exploitation and ascertaining that women employees receive just compensation. The capability of women in the workforce, promoting invaluable skills and views must be grasped through this advocacy.

“Your talent is not a bargaining chip. Despite facing issues like stagnant pay and inflation, there’s a reluctance to speak up due to fear of repercussions. It’s important to advocate for fair treatment and recognition of talent, as women make up half of the world’s population and possess valuable skills and intelligence” (Respondent 2).

Women respondents also stated the importance of recognizing women’s contributions and providing opportunities for them to excel. As stated by them women pursue acknowledgment for their work and the opportunity to make meaningful contributions without requiring special treatment. Flexible work arrangements are particularly essential especially in post-COVID, as they permit women to manage their responsibilities effectively. HR’s role in promoting such flexibility is vital for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment where women can thrive.

“Women are not asking for special treatment or more pay. Instead, they seek recognition for their contributions and the opportunity to contribute as much as they can. They emphasize the importance of being placed in positions where they can thrive and make significant contributions. Flexibility in work arrangements, especially post-COVID, is crucial for accommodating their needs” (Respondent 3).

Work-family conflict can be reduced by implementing family-friendly HR practices, such as flexible work schedules and childcare assistance, which will benefit women more than men who experience similar problems (Burke, 2002; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). According to Kelly and Kalev (2006), formalizing these policies guarantees equal access and lessens discrimination. For HR policies to be effective, they must be incorporated with organizational strategies, leadership styles, and cultural norms. Furthermore, biases in hiring and promotion can be lessened by standardizing and objectifying performance evaluations (Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Reskin and McBrier, 2000). Biases can be further reduced by formalizing HR policies, regulating evaluation contexts, and reducing personal discrimination (Chugh, 2004; Son Hing et al., 2008). Both benign and hostile sexist beliefs can be decreased by educating organizational decision-makers about gender roles and sexism, though the latter is more difficult to achieve.

6. Conclusion

The study emphasizes the profound impact of various strategies in empowering women within Malaysia’s corporate sector. Main themes acknowledged include flexible work arrangements, work-life balance initiatives, anti-discrimination policies, supportive family policies, leadership development, and inclusive organizational culture.

Among these, flexible work arrangements and work-life balance appeared to be the most critical factors. Women respondents emphasized the difficulties they face in juggling work and family responsibilities, which can lead to stress and burnout. Several approaches such as telecommuting, flexible hours, and parental leave are essential in helping women manage their dual roles effectively. Additionally, anti-discrimination policies and supportive family-friendly measures, including maternity

leave and childcare facilities, are also essential in creating an empowering women's work environment.

The importance of ongoing policy review and enforcement cannot be overstated, as these actions ensure real progress in gender equality. Leadership development and mentorship programs are important to address the representation of gender foster women's career advancement. Furthermore, gender sensitivity training can foster a more inclusive workplace culture, while diverse hiring practices promote equal opportunities.

In summary, developing comprehensive and empowering circumstances for women in Malaysia's corporate sector requires the implementation of flexible work arrangements, supportive policies, and development programs. By focusing on these strategies, organizations can enhance overall performance, retain valuable talent, and advance gender equality.

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