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A phenomenology inquiry into the challenges of empowering women in Malaysia corporate sector

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Abstract: The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges of empowering women in Malaysia's corporate sector. The study utilized a qualitative method that is guided by phenomenological inquiry to understand the challenges of empowering women in corporate sectors. The finding established five main challenges of empowering women in the corporate sector which consist of: challenges to balance work and family obligations, lack of role models and representation in leadership roles, inadequate policies, enforcement and support for gender equality, limited access to education and training and fear of speaking up and judgment. The study depends mainly on women leaders as a primary source of data. The experiences being shared may be different from each other based on their role and positions. The study will be appropriate for corporate sectors and human resource management to develop policies and procedures that are needed to empower women within organizations and corporate sectors.

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

1. Introduction

Promoting women's empowerment in the corporate sector necessitates a thorough strategy ahead of merely enhancing women's 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). 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).

Though women's underrepresentation in leadership has been studied previously, nevertheless most of the research has emphasized on statistical analysis, such as the percentage of women in senior positions or the effects of gender quotas (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004; Terjesen et al., 2009). On the other hand, there is still a significant research gap concerning the lived experiences of women in leadership roles, particularly in Malaysia's corporate sector. The personal and professional obstacles women encounter when navigating leadership roles, such as unconscious biases, work-life balance, and restricted access to influential networks, are frequently disregarded in studies on women's empowerment in the area (Pontefract, 2024).

By employing a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of female leaders in Malaysia's corporate environment, this study seeks to close this gap. Compared with the previous studies (Ali and Syed, 2017; Mohamed et al., 2021), which principally relied on quantitative measures or policy evaluations, this study directs on the subjective experiences of women, presenting more profound understanding of the barriers they face during their leadership journeys. This strategy will enhance the body of literature by providing a more distinct understanding of how women interpret, experience, and overcome obstacles such as gender pay gaps, barriers to career advancement, and limited access to sponsorship or mentorship (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021).

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). 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).

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 quota, though commendable, falls short due to complex roadblocks such as feminist conventions, limited social networks, and flawed decision-making processes.

Through an investigation of the lived experiences of women leaders, this study offers qualitative aspect that offers fresh insights into the empowerment of women in corporate settings which had been unexplored earlier. It will extend current understanding by offering actionable insights into how organizations can foster genuine empowerment through policy reform and cultural change, moving beyond numerical representation to focus on the real experiences and challenges women face.

Overview of women's empowerment in the corporate sector

Ahead of just increasing the number of women in higher positions, promoting women's empowerment in the corporate sector entails an inclusive approach. Women continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in leadership roles worldwide. According to Grant Thornton's 2023 International Business Report (IBR), women

hold only 29% of senior leadership positions globally. This lack of advancement indicated the necessity of a persistent pattern in many areas, in which women face substantial barriers such as unconscious prejudices, limited access to networks, and difficulties to achieve work-life balance. These barriers prevent women from achieving professional advancement and prevent organizations from benefiting from diverse leadership.

Many countries have deeply ingrained cultural norms and organizational practices that give preference to male leadership, which have an impact on the corporate environment. For example, despite laws supporting gender equality, women in the United States, especially women of color continue to confront structural obstacles that thwart them from achieving high positions. Women make about 82 cents for every dollar earned by men, making the gender pay gap a persistent problem (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Similarly, in Europe, many women still struggle with societal expectations regarding caregiving roles, which can impede their career progression. Some countries have implemented gender quotas to increase the representation of women in the workforce.

In comparison, Malaysia presents a unique yet familiar landscape for women's empowerment in corporate leadership. While the percentage of women in senior management positions stands at 40%, consistent with the previous year, their promotion to senior roles remains challenging, constituting less than 7% in both public and private sectors. Gender disparities persist, with women earning between 70.6% to 83.2% of men's median earnings. This reflects a broader pattern of underrepresentation similar to that seen globally.

Malaysia, in contrast, offers a distinct yet recognizable environment for women's empowerment in corporate leadership. Although the proportion of women in senior management is 40%, which is consistent from the previous year, it is still difficult for women to advance to senior roles with less than 7% of them in the public and private sectors compared with previous years. In addition women earning between 70.6% and 83.2% of men's median earnings, implying persistent gender disparities. This is indicative of a larger underrepresentation pattern that is prevalent throughout the world. Malaysia's context also emphasizes some distinct differences. For example, cultural expectations surrounding women's roles as primary caregivers are particularly evident, which can limit women's professional aspirations and development. Although the 30% gender quota introduced in Malaysia is noteworthy, but it is still inadequate to overcome the multifaceted roadblocks women face, such as limited social networks and inconsistent decision-making processes. Furthermore, enforcement gaps in Malaysia's legal framework for gender equality allow discriminatory practices to continue, in contrast to some Western countries where such frameworks are more strictly enforced (Jeyapal, 2016; Muniandy, 2018).

Thus, removing these barriers is necessary for true empowerment in Malaysia's corporate sector. In order for women to influence corporate culture, create policies, and participate in strategic decision-making, it is necessary to integrate them into leadership positions within organizations (Pontefract, 2024). By using a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of women leaders in Malaysia's corporate environment, this study seeks to close a significant research gap. In contrast to earlier research that mostly relied on quantitative measurements or

policy assessments (Ali and Syed, 2017; Mohamed et al., 2021), this investigation will concentrate on the subjective experiences of women, offering more depth on the obstacles they face as they pursue leadership roles.

The goal of empowerment is to establish a work environment that fosters women's advancement and well-being. This entails creating laws that address the particular difficulties faced by women, such as obstacles to career advancement and gender pay disparities (Sirivunnabood and Liao, 2021). In order to ensure that every employee feels safe and appreciated, it also entails developing a supportive culture that actively fights harassment and discrimination (Pontefract, 2024). According to Galasanjigmed and Sekiguchi (2023), empowering women in the workplace entails recognizing and utilizing their strengths, offering chances for skill development, and making mentorship and sponsorship more accessible.

By addressing the lived experiences of women leaders, this study provides a qualitative dimension previously underexplored, contributing new perspectives on corporate women's empowerment. It will extend current understanding by offering actionable insights into how organizations can foster genuine empowerment through policy reform and cultural change, moving beyond numerical representation to focus on the real experiences and challenges women face.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social role theory

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). The theory is important for assessing the societal expectations and stereotypes affecting women's professional opportunities. Social role theory exemplifies a comprehensive framework to understand the challenges that affect women's career development. Social role theory is exceptionally appropriate in the corporate sector as it emphasizes how traditional gender roles and stereotypes affect organizational change and career development for women. The theory in addition helps to assess the reason why women face barriers to progressing in their careers and attaining leadership roles.

This research intends to investigate how deeply ingrained gender norms in Malaysia's corporate environment impact women's career trajectories and leadership aspirations by incorporating Social Role Theory into the study. The analysis of the qualitative data gathered from female leaders will be guided by this theoretical framework, which will help to reveal the ways in which societal expectations impact the experiences of these individuals and their professional growth. In doing so, this study contributes to the larger objectives of gender equality in leadership by recognizing obstacles and offering practical advice on how to overcome them. Ultimately, this research aims to add to the current conversation on elevating women

into leadership positions and creating a more equal workplace by demonstrating the connection between Social Role Theory and the experiences of women in Malaysia's corporate sector.

2.2. Challenges of empowering women

2.2.1. Gender differences in leadership styles

According to social role theory, the roles of men and women are now overlapping (Eagly et al., 2000), and more women are entering the workforce and seeking managerial positions in their careers. Due to this, gender issues in the workplace are prominently noticed and women leaders suffer from it. Leadership styles are either autocratic (goal-oriented) or democratic (interpersonal relation-oriented). These leadership styles are further classified into transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership styles (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). However, compared to men, the achievements of women leaders are measured by their leadership styles and outcomes, whereas the achievements of men leaders are measured by organizational competitiveness, control, or hold over the organization. The gender composition at the workplace could impact one's gender identity and the respective gender stereotypes (Chen and Houser, 2019; Cohen and Swim, 1995; Cota and Dion, 1986; Hoyt et al., 2010).

2.2.2. Organizational bias

Women leaders encounter biases stemming from gender differences within organizational settings (Eagly et al., 1992; Lopez and Ensari, 2014; Maas and Torres-González, 2011). Subordinates are more accepting of women in charismatic and democratic leadership roles. However, if women display assertive or autocratic leadership styles, they often face organizational bias due to stereotyping. Conversely, there is less incongruity when women exhibit more democratic or charismatic leadership traits, which are traditionally associated with femininity (Hackman and Wageman, 1995; Lopez and Ensari, 2014). Women who demonstrate self-promotion, aggressiveness, or assertiveness may be viewed as deviating from gender norms and receive fewer positive reactions within the organization. According to Eagly and Karau (2002), women who adopt dominant, assertive, directive, or self-promoting leadership styles are perceived as straying further from societal expectations of female gender roles and consequently receive less favorable responses.

2.2.3. Corporate culture and dynamics

Organizational culture represents the way things are done within a workplace, including its values, principles, norms, and acceptable behaviors (Lundy and Cowling, 1996; Martins and Terblanche, 2003; Schein, 1990). This culture is influenced by various factors such as leadership styles, organizational characteristics, environmental factors, and the founders' cultural philosophy (Szczepańska and Kosiorek, 2017). Many companies have masculine cultures because leadership roles have traditionally been dominated by men (Rodgers-Healy, 2008), and these cultural contexts can contribute to dysfunctional organizational climates marked by toxic leadership, bullying, harassment, and gender inequality (Berdahl et al., 2018). In response to these challenges, liberal feminist theorists advocate for equal rights, democracy, and the active participation of women in the labor market (Tong, 2009).

Feminist standpoint theory empowers marginalized women to improve their situations by reflecting on their everyday experiences (Guring, 2020), giving them a voice to negotiate their identities and challenge discrimination and sexism (Bell et al., 2019).

2.2.4. Societal expectations and stereotyping

Another significant barrier to women's career progression is gender stereotyping. Macarie et al. (2011) note that societal beliefs about gender roles contribute to women being underrepresented in top management positions. Sowjanya et al. (2017) further explain that family systems and patriarchal social structures often limit women's career advancement by assigning them predetermined roles such as caring for children and elderly family members. Schwanke (2013) highlights how societal forces create assumptions and stereotypes that hinder women's leadership roles, particularly in male-dominated workplaces. Eagly and Cowley's (1986) social role theory helps to understand the origins of gender stereotyping in the workplace. This theory suggests that individuals tend to conform to social norms associated with their gender, leading to perceptions of women as caregivers and men as leaders (Eagly and Wood, 2012).

2.2.5. Work-family conflict

Work-family conflict poses a significant challenge for women striving for advancement in the workplace (Brue, 2019). The increasing participation of women in the workforce can be attributed to societal changes granting them greater employment rights and opportunities (Sekścińska et al., 2016). Economic factors, such as rising living costs, have also led to more dual-income households, transforming traditional family dynamics (Duxbury et al., 2007). Effective boundary management strategies become crucial for achieving work-life balance as the boundaries between work and personal life blur (Field and Chan, 2018; Leduc, Houlfort and Bourdeau, 2016). Support from spouses, families, employers, and colleagues is vital for women in management to navigate these challenges (Mahasa, 2016). However, many organizations still lack female-friendly policies and maintain masculine cultures (Kahn, 2014), despite the potential benefits of family-friendly policies in helping women manage their dual responsibilities (Belwal and Belwal, 2014).

2.2.6. Challenges to career development opportunities

Changes in global workforce dynamics and talent investments increased the demand for women's leadership development programs to eliminate women's underrepresentation in leadership programs (Debebe et al., 2016). According to Kanter's (1993) theory of structural empowerment, groups are promoted in work environments where they have access to opportunities to learn and develop, amongst other things. According to this theory, jobs that are highly visible and central to the organization's purpose, such as leadership, facilitate opportunities for meaningful work through informal and formal support alliances (Orgambidez-Ramos and Borrego-Alés, 2014). In a male-dominated environment, women who participate in training interventions are more likely to experience increased social networking

activities, self-advocacy behaviors and enhanced positive psychological states (Pereira, 2017).

2.2.7. Challenges of patriarchy for women's career progression

The concept of patriarchy denotes a society in which men control and dominate their dominance in the form of violence or excluding them from decision-making positions (Hook, 2004). This concept of a patriarchal society prevents women from progressing in their positions of decision-making and gaining authority (Dahal, 2013). Often, women living in rural areas face significant obstacles to career advancement due to patriarchal and hegemonic cognition (Ni Fhlatharta and Farrell, 2017). In addition to that men were expected to supply for the family financially and they see themselves as natural leaders instead of women. As stated by Elaine and Karubi (2018) their studies in Malaysia indicate that women are compelled to take on more household duties in a patriarchal environment, predominantly when it follows the traditional model of the "breadwinner father, housewife mother. Although rural women performed both productive and reproductive roles in their families, they obtained no financial benefit for either (Ariffin, 1992)".

3. Methodology

Due to qualitative inquiry's emphasis on depth of understanding over representativeness (Leba et al., 2021), this study concentrates specifically on women occupying corporate roles within the Malaysian corporate sector. To ensure a full understanding of their experiences and to make the sampling and participant selection criteria clear, this study will concentrate on women from various levels of management, including both mid-level professionals and senior leaders. Specific criteria, including the participants' roles within the organization, the industries they represent, and their location within Malaysia, will be taken into consideration during the selection process. These women actively navigate the corporate landscape and possess firsthand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities encountered by female professionals in Malaysia.

Ethical considerations will be paramount throughout the research process to ensure participants feel comfortable and respected during interviews. Measures will be implemented to uphold participants' privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent will be sought from all participants.

Given the study's location in Malaysia, adherence to local ethical guidelines will be imperative, although institutional review board approval may not be mandated. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process to ensure participants felt comfortable and respected during interviews. Measures were implemented to uphold participants' privacy and confidentiality, and informed consent was sought from all participants. Given the study's location in Malaysia, adherence to local ethical guidelines was imperative.

For the data analysis phase, organizations actively involved in implementing initiatives to promote women's empowerment in Malaysia's business sector were selected. The selection criteria encompassed diversity in industries, organizational size, geographical location, and demonstrated commitment to gender diversity. Data

collection encompassed interviews aimed at exploring goals, strategies, implementation processes, challenges, and outcomes of these efforts.

Thematic analysis is a method used to find recurring themes, patterns, and important findings about women's empowerment that come from observations, document analysis, and interview data. Thematic analysis was selected because it can effectively draw attention to important themes that surface from participant narratives and is in line with the phenomenological approach to comprehending lived experiences. This methodology is especially well-suited for examining intricate social phenomena like women's empowerment because it permits flexibility in the interpretation of data.

Data interpretation will involve connecting insights to existing theoretical frameworks, relevant literature, and the broader social context to generate meaningful insights and understandings about factors contributing to the success of women's empowerment efforts.

Prior to conducting a thematic analysis, the data will be methodically coded. Recurring patterns will be used to identify themes. Peer debriefing and member checks will be used to validate themes, which will improve the study's transparency and dependability.

4. Finding

The findings of the study are presented in response to the research objective of this study:

The following five themes have been identified.

- 1) Challenges to balance work and family obligation
- 2) Lack of Role Models and Representation in Leadership Roles
- 3) Inequalities in workplace culture
- 4) Inadequate Policies, Enforcement and Support for Gender Equality
- 5) Limited Access to Education and Training

4.1. Challenges to balance work and family obligations

The finding revealed several challenges women faced in managing work and family obligations. Certain areas that have been highlighted based on the themes include the subjective perspective of women's success, the incredible demand for work, and gender norms. Some of the findings from women respondents highlighted the term success, which is different according to the individual, in this case, according to different women and subject to change according to their personal priorities, particularly after marriage. This assumption denotes the significance of understanding that the concept, values, and success of career goals among women is determined based on their personal values and life circumstances.

Once the women have got married, it's depending on their priority, the definition of success is different for each woman (Respondent 1).

Success for me was to achieve the top position in my career. Nevertheless, after getting married and having kids, my focus changed. Success for me is also about having a balance of having my career which does not affect or compromise my family duty and my career (Respondent 2).

In addition to that the finding also highlighted the challenges women face to fulfill their personal and family obligations due to high demand in their work and professional roles. The surmounting time and effort required to meet their family responsibility can hamper women's ability to concentrate on their careers which will consequently cause conflict between personal duties and professional development.

Demand at work can be overwhelming, set against personal or family responsibilities, which places a huge challenge on trying to balance both. Societal expectations and norms often overburden the female gender by increasing the burden of care for children and the elderly, which can affect women's career growth (Respondent 1).

Balancing work and family responsibilities can be particularly challenging in the corporate world, especially in cultures where caregiving is primarily seen as a woman's duty. This can limit the ability to take on additional responsibilities or pursue career advancement opportunities that require greater time commitments (Respondent 2).

As stated by Brue (2018), most women are required to juggle multiple roles which will affect their work-life boundaries. Concurrently they may be affected by emotional burdens, attitudes, behaviors, and gossip from work to home, and so on. (Liu et al., 2020). Most of the time work-family conflict happens when women give precedence to their careers over their personal lives (Bakker et al., 2009).

The discussion with the respondents in addition highlights the prevalent social expectation that women are obligated to be the primary caregivers in their families. This expectation will affect their ability to progress in their careers. As highlighted through the findings, women always juggle between their professional commitments as well as their responsibilities. This is particularly apparent in a society where domestic and childcare responsibilities fall excessively on women.

Women sometimes find it difficult to strike a balance between their professional and personal commitments, especially in societies where women are typically expected to handle most domestic and childcare chores (Respondent 3).

Women are always seen as the primary caregivers. I have a full-time job. However, I am still expected to look after my household chores and manage my kids. It is a double responsibility for me which makes me have a hard time focusing on my career. Most of the time I must make the decision either to attend an important meeting at my workplace or to stay with my kids for the school event, for example. Sometimes it makes me feel extremely exhausted and leaves very little space for my career progress (Respondent 4).

As stated by Macarie et al. (2011), women are underrepresented in the corporate sector, especially in higher management positions due to societal beliefs about the roles of men and women. This statement is enhanced by Sowjana et al. (2017), by stressing that patriarchal social structure and family system often hinder women's ability to set free from the roles that are assigned to them such as taking care of in-laws, raising children, and supporting the family in the midst of advancing their careers.

Furthermore, Chen et al.'s research from 2020 highlights how women experience a great deal of stress when juggling work and family obligations, which frequently leads to burnout and a decline in job satisfaction. The idea that women

should put their families before their careers (O'Reilly et al., 2015) exacerbates this and feeds the never-ending cycle of conflict between work and home life. Additionally, Kahn et al. (2021) contend that these issues are made more difficult for women to overcome by the absence of organizational support for flexible work schedules.

For me, the role of a woman means you can't neglect your child. At my university, they often schedule meetings on Saturday and Sunday nights. I can't participate in those because I have kids, and weekends are the time I spend with my family and help them with their homework. However, since most of the decision-makers are men, they tend to leave these responsibilities to their wives or domestic helpers. As a result, they schedule meetings on Saturday nights without considering these family commitments (Respondent 4).

4.2. Lack of role models and representation in leadership roles

The findings of the study shed light on the challenges of the underrepresentation of women as leaders within the corporate sector in Malaysia. The majority of the women in the corporate sector face gender disparity in which they find themselves being outnumbered and marginalized in professional settings.

Though there are increasing numbers of women in organizations, we still are experiencing low representation of women in leadership positions. This might prompt a vicious cycle in which we have a lack of role models and mentors established for aspiring female leaders (Respondent 2).

The issue of inequality affects most of the women's career development, also causing them to have difficulties receiving essential support mechanisms such as mentorship and networking opportunities. Macarie and Moldovan (2012), used the concept of a vertical bias as a sign of an overrepresentation of women in mid-management roles and a low representation of women in upper management and positions with greater authority and decision-making.

In Malaysian organizations, women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions. Women may find it challenging to obtain networking, sponsorship, and mentoring opportunities—all of which are essential for job advancement—due to this lack of representation (Respondent 3).

Women are mainly underrepresented in senior leadership positions in Malaysia's corporate sector. They are having a tough time gaining opportunities for networking, sponsorship, and mentoring, due to a lack of representation in the organization which carries a necessary element for them to advance in their job (Respondent 4).

I would say that the main issue is inequality, and we are being underrepresented. We are being restrained in many of the social outings and business outings (Respondent 5).

Consequently, an insufficient number of women role models within leadership positions creates a vicious cycle deterring aspiring women leaders from progressing in their careers. It has been challenging for women to integrate leadership with their personal lives due to their lack of experience in leadership, because of the

organizational culture created by men for men and their lack of representation at the top (Macarie et al., 2011).

Women in the corporate sector still face barriers to advancing into senior leadership roles. Apart from their qualification and capacity, most of the time women encounter barriers in accessing networking opportunities, securing sponsorship, and regaining mentorship support. These challenges patterned to the underrepresentation of women in leadership position and prevent their career progression (Respondent 6).

Male agency ideals are still rampant in the contemporary organization and mostly strength is linked to autocratic leadership, and democratic or participatory leadership which is seen as a sign of weakness (Macarie et al., 2011). It is crucial to have mentors, and role models whose behaviors and styles one can emulate; unfortunately, for women, these individuals are almost nonexistent (Ibarra et al., 2013). Even though some women succeed in leadership roles, the majority are unable to develop a female protégé or guide other aspiring women. As such there are very few mentors available for other women employees to guide and advise.

The interview session from the majority of the women highlights the challenges of underrepresentation experienced by them in the corporate sectors. Most of the respondents endlessly conveyed their experiences of being outnumbered and marginalized in numerous professional settings. Being a leader in the manufacturing industry, respondents perceived the predominance number of men within their careers. Respondents claimed the relentlessly low representation of women in leadership positions, emphasizing the lack of role models towards inspiring and motivate women. In addition, some respondents stressed the obstacles faced by women to gain opportunities for networking because they are being underrepresented in leadership roles.

Working in the manufacturing industry as a project manager at the time, I realized that throughout my whole career, the majority of the people around me were always man, particularly at the engineering side (Respondent 1).

Though there are increasing number of women in organization, but we still are experiencing low representation of women in leadership position. This might prompt a vicious cycle in which we have a lack of role models and mentors established for aspiring female leaders (Respondent 2).

In Malaysian organizations, women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions. Women may find it challenging to obtain networking, sponsorship, and mentoring opportunities—all of which are essential for job advancement—due to this lack of representation (Respondent 3).

Women are mainly being underrepresented in senior leadership position in Malaysia corporate sector. They are having a tough time gaining opportunities for networking, sponsorship, and mentoring, due to lack of representation in the organization which carries a necessary element for them to advance in their job (Respondent 4).

Women in corporate sector still facing barriers to advance into senior leadership roles. Apart from their qualification and capacity, most of the time women encounter barriers in accessing networking opportunity, securing sponsorship, and regaining mentorship support. These challenges patterned to the underrepresentation of women in leadership position and prevent their career progression (Respondent 5).

Furthermore, studies conducted by Eagly and Carli (2007) show that the lack of female leaders can reinforce negative perceptions about women's abilities, which deters other women from pursuing leadership roles. Furthermore, Kram (1985) highlights the value of mentoring relationships in advancing a career, pointing out that the lack of female mentors can impede the professional development of women and perpetuate the gender gap in leadership.

4.3. Inequalities in workplace culture and women's career progression

This theme signifies the prevalent nature of the challenges women face within the corporate sector, comprising bias in hiring, pay inequality, gender stereotypes, lack of support for work-life balance, and persistent discrimination despite legal safeguards. As stated by the respondents, systemic gender inequality shapes each phase of women's agenda, deterring their opportunities for fair treatment, growth, and fair compensation.

Respondent stated that biases continue in the workplace despite legal protections against gender discrimination. This implies that women continue to face prejudice and unfair treatment in various aspects of their employment. From hiring decisions to compensation packages, promotions, and access to training opportunities, women encounter barriers that hinder their career advancement. As stated by Kadiresan et al. (2015), cultural elements which consist of religious views, the nature of jobs, and pay are some of the variables that influence gender segregation in Malaysian workplaces. According to Ojo et al. (2017), organizational culture affects women most of the time. Consequently, this culture will also have an impact on women's career development. Respondent also shared how societal expectation and gender prejudice affect hiring practices, among women often confronting the issues about marital status and pregnancy throughout the job interview. This prejudice created more challenges for women seeking employment growth opportunity in corporate sector. Institutional discrimination in organizational structures, procedures, and practices is a main aspect in socializing the levels of both healthy and hostile gender bias among organizational decision-makers, according to research by Starnarski and Hing (2015).

Biases persist in the workplace notwithstanding legal safeguards against gender discrimination. Women may experience prejudice in terms of employment, compensation, promotions, and training and development opportunities (Respondent 1).

The minute an organization wants to bring in a woman for a job, one of the questions will be is you married are you pregnant now? (Respondent 2).

This theme signifies the prevalent nature of the challenges women face within the corporate sector, comprising bias in hiring, pay inequality, gender stereotypes, lack of support for work life balance and persistent discrimination despite legal safeguards. As the statement by the respondents said, systemic gender inequality shapes each phase of women's personal agenda, deterring their opportunities for fair treatment, growth and fair compensation. According to research utilizing thirty years' worth of data, women who perform at the same level as men are less likely to be promoted and paid similarly, particularly in highly educated, prestigious

professions like law and medicine (Joshi et al., 2015). Comparatively to men, women are more likely to perceive the path to advancement as stressful (McKinsey and Company and Lean In, 2015), have shorter career lifespans and are less satisfied with their jobs (Metz, 2011), and receive less recognition (Treviño et al., 2015).

There are also some gender stereotypes and cultural norms towards the traditional roles of a man and a woman, hence altering the perception and expectation within the workplace. For example, women would traditionally be seen as not being suitable for leadership or high-pressure roles. These cultural expectations also affect work-life balance since women are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities (Respondent 3).

Just like in any other part of the world, Malaysia has a wage gap in which, often, women's earnings are much less than men's for the same amount of work. This causes a lack of motivation and puts into danger the economic empowerment of women (Respondent 4).

The notion that gender stereotypes impede women's advancement in leadership roles is further supported by research by Eagly and Karau (2002), since women are frequently viewed as less competent in high-stakes scenarios. Additionally, research by Catalyst (2020) shows that work-life balance support from organizations can have a big impact on women's career advancement, underscoring the importance of workplace policies that support gender equality.

4.4. Inadequate policies, enforcement and support for gender equality

The finding of the study denoted several challenges faced by women in corporate sector pertaining to inadequate policies, enforcement, and support for gender equality. Some of the finding that has been identified including the gap in the gender equality laws enforcement, lack of HR support, problems with work-life balance and workload, biassed in work practice on women, and other cultural elements that affect career growth.

The finding from the respondent revealed that there are loopholes in the enforcement for gender equity despite of the presences of the law promoting gender equality in Malaysia which allow discriminatory practices to exist. This finding emphasized a more forceful mechanism to ensure that the law on gender equality is effectively being executed, and thus foster a valid framework for addressing gender gaps at workplace.

Although Malaysia has laws promoting gender equality, there may not be enough enforcement of the rules, and still many loopholes (Respondent 1).

The laws exist, but they are not being enforced appropriately. There is a requirement for robust mechanisms to safeguard compliance and to craft a genuine equitable workplace (Respondent 2).

As stated by Kahn (2014), many corporate sectors still have cultures that are dominated by men and lack "female-friendly" policies. Family-friendly policies, in the opinion of Belwal and Belwal (2014), can support female leaders in managing their obligations to their families, fostering flexible work environments, and achieving greater success in both the home and professional spheres. Von Hippel, Kalokerinos and Zacher (2017), on the other hand, found that workplace attitudes

against women and gender stereotypes could be made worse by family-friendly policies.

In addition to the law and enforcement, the respondents also emphasized the lack of support from the Human Resource Department. According to the finding, HR most of the time fails to support employees concerning meeting career advancement issues. Despite of heavy workload given to those women, insufficient support from HR further aggravated the challenges, which denoting the necessity of HR department to aggressively involve towards developing and supporting women employee instead of focusing solely on administrative task.

I felt overlooked in my career progression. Despite holding leadership roles, I faced immense workload and teaching commitments. HR seemed unaware of my struggles, leaving me at the mercy of bosses. I had to teach late nights and weekends, impacting my well-being and family life. It felt like being bullied by a male boss who delayed my confirmation for two years (Respondent 2).

HR's role goes beyond mere clock-in, clock-out monitoring. They should focus on measuring employees' contributions and fostering development. HR often confines itself to managing instead of truly developing employees. There's a need to redefine HR's role to strategically place employees where they can thrive (Respondent 3).

Some of the findings also showed the impacts of workload demand on the women's personal well-being and family life due to unsupportive management such as delays in confirmation from the male managers.

Biases and discrimination also appeared to be a main concern in the finding. This is apparent in the process of application forms and hiring practices, remarkably on marital status and pregnancy. These partialities negatively impact the view on women's acceptability for being accepted in their employment which hinders their career prospects.

Application for job question about marital status and pregnancy plan. Thus, the application form itself puts a tag as if you are a burden if you're married. These biases can cause women to feel like their personal life being unfairly analyzed impacting their opportunity of being hired (Respondent 5).

Ultimately the finding revealed the cultural influences and societal norms further hinder career development among women. As stated in the result of the study, women leaders expressed their concern on the extensive delays in recognition and promotion even though they have worked hard and been ambitious which often cause women to feel stagnant in their professions. There are also issues of familiarity and having connection within the organizational culture in which women will be progress if they have a closer relationship with the higher-level management.

Biases persist in the workplace notwithstanding legal safeguards against gender discrimination. Women may experience prejudice in terms of employment, compensation, promotions, and training and development opportunities (Respondent 4).

It's disappointing to see that, even after putting in a lot of endeavor women still struggle to get the acknowledgement, they deserve which cause many women to feel stagnant in their careers (Respondent 5).

In addition, research by Healy et al. (2011) indicates that the lack of effective policies and support systems contributes to women's underrepresentation in leadership roles, emphasizing the need for comprehensive organizational change to create equitable work environments.

4.5. Limited access to education and training

The finding also highlighted on the challenges of women to get access into education and training opportunities. Some of the challenges that have been highlighted include bias in the selection process, unfair distribution of training facilities, and deeply ingrained cultural norms that prioritize men's career advancement over women's. The finding this revealed that most of the time women do not have as many opportunities for education and trainings as men receive. This will obviously hinder their career progressions.

Women occasionally may not have as many opportunities for education and training as men have, which might impede their ability to grow in their careers (Respondent 1).

Male and female career development should not be seen in the same light, claim O'Neil and Bilimoria (2005). Men's traditional career models, which are characterized by stability, maintenance, and decline, can be challenged by women's career advancement. According to Ellemers (2014), women are noticeably more susceptible to contextual and social obstacles that prevent them from advancing in their careers. Female leaders may not be considered for leadership positions due to a lack of alignment between organizational development and career advancement practices and individual career planning (Schulz and Enslin, 2014).

In addition to the finding also indicates the limited access for professional development opportunities women will cause barriers for them to acquire the necessary skill to progress in this career. Women often find it hard to move into higher level and leadership position without equal access to training and education. This deprivation has derived a cycle of inequalities in which women are continuously being underrepresented in senior role and decision-making position.

In my experience, women often face limitations in accessing professional development opportunities compared to their male counterparts. This can be due to various factors such as biased selection processes, unequal access to training resources, and cultural norms that prioritize men's career advancement. As a result, women may find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for career growth. Addressing these disparities is crucial for fostering gender equality in the workplace and ensuring that all employees have equal opportunities to thrive (Respondent 2).

Men are often expected to prioritize their careers while women should prioritize their family responsibilities due to cultural norms and expectations. This social expectation severely limits women's capacity to seek additional education and training, which impedes their ability to advance professionally and take advantage of opportunities. It's a common misconception that women are only fit for household duties and that men belong in positions of leadership. The barriers that women

encounter in the workplace are made worse by these constrictive norms (Respondent 3).

It is believed that men will fill leadership positions and that women will only be capable of running households and organizations. These restrictions exacerbate the obstacles that women face in the workplace (Hodges, 2017).

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal numerous challenges that women confront in balancing their work and family responsibilities. Key themes emerged, including the subjective nature of women's success and achievement, increased work demands, and deeply ingrained gender norms. Women's definitions of success vary greatly, underscoring the necessity for organizational policies and societal approaches to accommodate diverse concepts of success. While some women prioritize professional accomplishments, others focus more on family obligations, emphasizing the need for flexibility in understanding women's career aspirations.

A critical insight from the findings is the profound impact of organizational support structures in helping women manage their dual responsibilities. Implementing flexible work schedules and family-friendly policies can significantly alleviate the challenges women face in achieving work-life balance. For instance, organizations could introduce part-time leadership roles that allow women to take on managerial responsibilities while balancing family obligations. This type of flexibility would empower women to progress in their careers without sacrificing their personal commitments.

Another pressing issue identified is the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, particularly in Malaysia. Despite a gradual increase in the number of women in corporate settings, they remain marginalized and outnumbered. This underrepresentation creates a vicious cycle, hindering aspiring women leaders from advancing in their careers. To address this, organizations should establish mentorship programs tailored for women, providing them with essential guidance and networking opportunities. Creating a culture that encourages women's leadership development is crucial for breaking this cycle and fostering a more inclusive corporate environment.

Despite existing legal protections against gender discrimination, workplace injustices, including biased hiring practices, pay gaps, and systemic gender bias continue to prevail. These inequities permeate every stage of women's careers, obstructing their access to equitable treatment, advancement, and compensation. Addressing these systemic barriers will require substantial initiatives aimed at transforming organizational cultures, policies, and societal attitudes. For example, conducting regular training sessions on gender sensitivity for all employees can raise awareness and help mitigate biases in hiring and promotion practices.

Moreover, the study revealed significant gaps in policies, enforcement, and support for gender equality. While Malaysia has laws addressing gender equality, ineffective enforcement allows discriminatory practices to persist. Inadequate human resources often overlook women's concerns regarding career advancement, and biases, such as inquiries about candidates' pregnancy and marital status, further

obstruct their professional growth. Enhancing the enforcement of existing laws and ensuring that human resource policies prioritize gender equality can create a more supportive work environment for women.

The limited access to training and educational opportunities was also highlighted as a barrier to women's career progression. Disparities in hiring practices and cultural norms that favor men's professional development contribute to this inequity, underscoring the need for targeted interventions. Organizations should ensure equal access to training programs and development resources for all employees, regardless of gender, to promote a fair opportunity for professional growth.

In summary, the study emphasizes the complex and multifaceted challenges women encounter in managing work and family responsibilities while striving for career advancement in predominantly male-dominated corporate environments. To address these challenges and achieve true gender equality in the workplace, concerted efforts must be made to transform societal norms, organizational practices, and policies.

By addressing these interconnected issues, gender discrimination, underrepresentation in leadership, and work-life balance through targeted strategies, we can pave the way for a more equitable and supportive work environment that enables women to thrive.

6. Limitation and suggestion for future research

The study's primary source of data, Malaysia's corporate sector's female leaders, presents a limitation. The study might not adequately represent the experiences of women at other levels of the corporate hierarchy, such as entry-level workers or middle management, even though their insights offer insightful perspectives on the difficulties of empowering women in leadership roles. These groups may present unique challenges and viewpoints that could contribute to a deeper understanding of women's empowerment in the workplace.

Furthermore, the study is based on phenomenological inquiry, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across all corporate sectors in Malaysia even though it is effective in exploring lived experiences. The results' applicability to other industries or smaller organizations may be limited due to their contextual binding to the individual experiences of the participants. Future studies could use a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to validate the results more broadly and offer broader insights.

The study's reliance on self-reported experiences is another drawback. This could lead to bias because participants might be reluctant to fully express their opinions or might frame their experiences in ways that are acceptable to society. For a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues facing women in the corporate sector, future research could benefit from triangulating data sources, such as interviews with male counterparts, HR specialists, or external stakeholders.

Finally, while the study does not thoroughly examine the role of cultural factors or societal norms that may also impact women's empowerment in the workplace, it does highlight a number of structural challenges, such as insufficient policies and

support for gender equality. Subsequent studies may examine the relationship between corporate policies and cultural norms, as well as how these elements work together to impact women's career progression. This could entail comparative studies or cross-cultural studies to determine how various socioeconomic contexts affect women's empowerment in corporate sectors worldwide.

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