

Work-Life Balance, Family Responsibilities and Lack of Mentoring as Barriers to Women's Career Advancement: The "Glass Ceiling" Phenomena in the Banking Industry in Malaysia

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Under-representation of women in top management positions has caught the attention in many countries worldwide. Like many other countries in the world, Malaysia is also facing a serious lack of female employees especially at the top management level. Previous studies have found that work-life balance, family responsibilities and lack of mentoring are perceived to be the barriers that barricade the career progression for women in many organizations. Hence, the objective of this paper is to examine these barriers that purportedly impede the career advancement of female employees in the banking industry. The unit of analysis for this research paper consists of female employees from various banks in Klang Valley, Malaysia. A sample of 113 respondents of female employees ranging from Assistant Managers to Vice Presidents was gathered from CIMB Bank, Ambank, Hong Leong Bank and RHB Bank collectively. Purposive sampling and convenience sampling techniques were used in this study to determine the target population as strictly female and only in Assistant Manager to Vice President Positions. For the purpose of this study, a self-administered questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale was distributed to 150 female employees of which 113 respondents completed the survey, i.e., a success rate of 75.3%. The data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) where descriptive analysis is presented. Single linear regression was

performed to evaluate the influence of perceived barriers towards the dependent variable, women's career advancement. The findings revealed that only family responsibilities have a significant influence on women's career advancement. In contrast, work-life balance and lack of mentoring do not have an influence on women's career advancement.

Key words: *work-life balance, family responsibilities, lack of mentoring and women's career advancement.*

Introduction

The under-representation of women in managerial positions has been one of the major concerns of career research (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). Similarly, Broadbridge and Hearn (2008); Ismail and Ibrahim (2008); Vinnicombe and Singh (2011) and Rowley and Yukongdi (2009), have expressed great concern about the under-representation of women in senior management, executive roles and on corporate boards. In 2010, the Department of Statistics of Malaysia (DOSM) reported that women made up 48.6% of the total population in Malaysia. Out of this female population, 45.7% of them were employed. Yet only 4.8% were in a senior management position and only a few of them were appointed to Malaysian corporate boards. In 2011, the Malaysian government took the initiative to increase the number of women on corporate boards by announcing a target for the corporate sector to have at least 30% of women at the senior management level by the end of 2016 (Corporate Governance Blueprint, 2011; Ali, 2017).

According to Maxifield (2005), under-representation of women at the top executive level is still a puzzling issue due to certain reasons. Thus, there is a need to find out the factors that impede women's career advancement in Malaysia especially in the banking industry and at top executive positions. Furthermore, extensive literature regarding the impediments to career advancement in USA, Europe and other countries indicate that women are facing significantly more obstacles to advancement than their male counterparts (Scheuermann et al., 1998; Linehan, 2001).

Problem Statement

Women in Malaysia face several barriers in their career enhancement in spite of the higher female education level and growing affluence of the Malaysian economy. According to The Malaysian Reserve (2013), even though 75% of university students are women, the number of fresh graduates who entered organizations does not match with Malaysia's female labor force. Many qualified and experienced women are facing challenges in their quest to climb

up the corporate ladder and they become de-motivated and lose interest in their career progression. These challenges impede their advancement and drag them down in their pursuit of progress, hence they pose a huge barrier for female employees' career growth. This paper will investigate the perceived barriers that impede women's career advancement and provide recommendations on how to overcome the under-representation.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to examine the under-representation of female employees at the top management level with specific objectives of examining the influence of work-life balance, family responsibilities and lack of mentoring towards women's career advancement among female employees in the banking industry.

Literature review

Whilst women are gradually making a significant entrance into the workplace, unfortunately men still appear to be dominating the board room as there are few women who obtain these positions. Women's career progress appears to be influenced by the "glass ceiling" indicating that it is a continued bogus barrier to the progression of women to hold executive positions (Bagues & Estev-Volart, 2010; Sethi & Ghatak, 2018; Ambrose et al, 2016). Some researchers have acknowledged a number of factors that can be considered as obstacles to women's career advancement, such as work and family conflict (Brownell, 1998), work-life imbalance (Swanson et al. 1997), family concern and family responsibilities (Houseknecht and Macke, 1981), family and personal responsibilities (Jogulu and Wood, 2011; Shabir & ur Rahim, 2017) and lack of mentoring (Man et al, 2009).

Work and life balance of female employees is a principal issue that has become a major interest among researchers. This is because work and family responsibilities can have an adverse impact on the attempt to balance various aspects of life such as marital, family and work life. According to Peeters et al (2005), tensions created by job and family causes were often mismatched which leads to imbalance. Women struggle with contradictory influences in their career outcomes, especially when demands for work are increasingly intruding into family life (Voydanoff, 2005). According to Hughes (2007), work-life balance is considered a major source of dissatisfaction and distress to career women. Many researchers in the UK and the USA, such as Mayrhofer et al (2008) and Orser and Leck (2010), have demonstrated the existence of work-family conflict which creates adverse influences towards women who are working and have concurrent family responsibilities.

Family is considered as a barrier because married women with children are unable to balance **family responsibilities** and work life very well (Catalyst, 2007; Lirio et al, 2007; Segal,

2005; White, 2003; Kelly, 1998). According to Lirio et al. (2007), family responsibilities have been regarded as key barriers in the study of women's career aspirations, especially factors related to care for children and marital status. Mavin (2001) observed that family responsibilities may be a disadvantage for women because most organizations expect high commitments at work. Valentova (2005) found that family and domestic responsibilities may hinder women's career advancement. This is because women may have to choose between their simultaneous goals of striving to hold a top executive position and caring for their family.

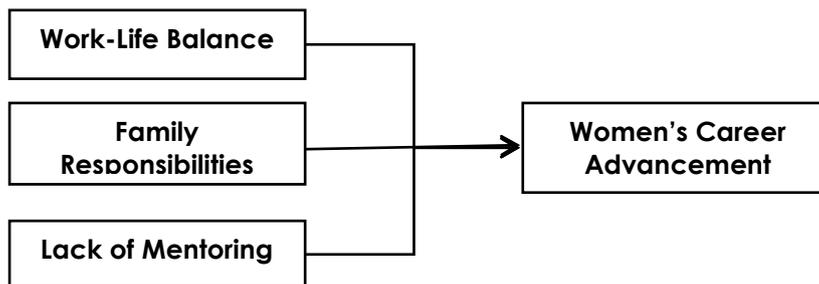
Lack of mentoring is viewed as a disadvantage to women because they may have missed the considerable benefits mentoring provides on career progression. Kram (1985) suggested that mentoring shapes the protégés' career experiences. Tepper (1995) observed that mentoring relationships support junior colleagues' (protégés) career growth and professional development. A study on career advancement for women in higher education conducted by Maack and Passet (1994) found that women who received mentoring were able to accomplish higher levels of career development compared to women who did not receive mentoring. Klenke (1996) agreed that women frequently have limited mentoring opportunities especially in male-dominated organizations. Mentoring helps organizations to have a better comprehension of their employees, especially among female's whose counterparts discover the balance of their work skills and familial duties. However, looking for and identifying someone who is committed to being a mentor has been difficult for women (Ragins & Cotton 1999), which in turn makes it more difficult for women to enhance their skills and move their career upwards. Overall, research suggests that women must attain a strong network of mentors who will guide them to their professional development, so they can advance in their career (Gambhir & Washington, 2003). Headlam-Wells et al. (2006) found that mentoring plays an important role in the career advancement of successful female managers as women who have been mentored produce improvements in many key management skills (Headlam-Wells, 2004; Shahbaz et al 2013).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

This study applied the Social Cognitive Career Theory which was developed by Lent et al (1994) since it provides an understanding of how people make choices, form interests, and accomplish various success levels in their educational and occupational quests. This is an influential theory of cognitive and motivational processes that assists in understanding how the combination of environmental, personality and behavioural factors impact one's work satisfaction. This theory explains that several cognitive determinants (e.g., goals, outcome expectations and self-efficacy) correlate with other aspects of the individual and the determinants of the environment (e.g., barriers and social support) to help outline the development of career progress.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the identification of the dependent and independent variables with the underlying social cognitive career theory, a theoretical framework to support the study was developed as shown in Figure 1 below.



Hypotheses Development

There are numerous studies around the world that found that work and family are negatively related to career advancement. Larson (1994) found that the crucial reason for the lack of career ambitions among middle management nurses was work-family conflict. Whiting and Wright (2001) found that work-family conflict was negatively related to career advancement among female accountants in New Zealand. Peeters et al (2005) suggested that job demands and family demands are often contradictory which in the end lead to an imbalance between the two areas. These studies showed that work-life balance is a major stumbling block for career women, hence the first hypothesis for this study is developed.

H₁: There is an influence of work-life balance towards women's career advancement among female employees in the banking industry

Many researchers acknowledge that family responsibilities are indeed one of the aspects of the “glass ceiling”(Cutler & Jackson, 2002; Carnes & Radojevich-Kelley, 2011; Al-Manasra, 2013). These studies provide strong empirical evidence that family responsibilities are impediments towards women's career advancement. Studies by Wolfinger et al. (2008), establish that career development for women relates to their family commitments which affect their opportunities for further career progress. Baral and Bhargava (2011) evidenced that women who receive support from their family, face less stress and have greater career growth than women who do not get support from their family. Support from spouses produces positive moods among women, which subsequently increases women's career

creativity and performance ability at work. These empirical studies of family responsibilities are the basis of the development of the second hypothesis.

H₂: There is an influence of family responsibilities towards women's career advancement among female employees in the banking industry.

Research has shown that mentoring has been regarded as one significant career development instrument for women (Missirian, 1982; Burke & McKeen, 1990; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In a study of female manager by Collin (1983) and supported by Dodgson's (1986) study of female Canadian educational administrators, found that mentoring is a fundamental career tool that has positive consequences for women. Maxwell (2009) proved that mentoring programs improved the diversity of genders in management positions which consequently enabled female mentees to expand their career development. He identified that mentoring not only increases the number of women in higher management levels but also improves their chances to move upwards in their career. In a study on female administrators by Lee and Nolan (1998), it was revealed that 47% of them had no mentors, indicating that women have inadequate opportunities in term of mentoring. On this basis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: There is an influence of lack of mentoring towards women's career advancement among female employees in the banking industry.

Methodology

This study adopt a quantitative research design to observe the influence of the independent variables (work-life balance, family responsibilities and lack of mentoring) on the dependable variable (women's career advancement). Self-administered questionnaires were distributed via a personal contact and through representatives to 150 female employees ranging from junior to middle-management levels at various banks in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The objective of selecting female employees from various banks is to get views from a diverse group of women so that the results can be applied to the larger population groups.

The survey questionnaire was constructed to measure the influence of work-life balance, family responsibilities, and lack of mentoring towards women's career advancement. Thus it reflects the theoretical framework of this study. All variables indicated the extent of agreement or disagreement with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) as suggested by Sekaran et al. (2010).

Research Findings

The data collected from 113 female respondents hailing from various banks in Klang Valley was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science Version 24. Eleven demographic profile characteristics were tested using descriptive analysis. Pearson correlation and regression analyses were conducted to investigate the influence of perceived barriers that impede female employees from advancing in their career.

The findings on work-life balance evaluated by Pearson correlation analysis indicated a moderate and positive correlation with women's career advancement ($r = .283$ and $p = .011$). Meanwhile, the result obtained from regression analysis revealed that work-life balance did not have a significant effect on women's career advancement ($B = -.032$ and $p = .725$) which led to hypothesis one (**H₁**) being rejected. This study is in agreement with the study conducted by Marongiu and Ekehammar (1999) who found that the conflict between work and life did not hamper women in the middle managerial positions.

Hypothesis 2 (**H₂**) predicted that there was an influence of family responsibilities on women's career advancement among female employees in the banking industry. Based on the result presented by regression analysis, family responsibilities variable had a significant effect on women's career advancement ($p = .000$). Hence, **H₂** is accepted whereby family responsibilities have an influence on women's career advancement.

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that lack of mentoring has a moderate and positive correlation with women's career advancement ($r = .355$ and $p = .000$) which confirmed that both variables are correlated. Nevertheless, regression analysis demonstrated a p value of higher than .05 which means that lack of mentoring had no significant effect ($b = .124$, $p = .187$). This result rejected **H₃**, whereby lack of mentoring does not influence women's career advancement. A similar result was found by Tharanou (2005) and Kram and Isabella (1985), who state that mentoring helps to develop psycho-social skills and build networks but it does not influence women's career advancement. Tharanou (2005) noted in his survey of over 3220 lower- to middle-level Australian employees in the finance and business industries, that mentoring did not help women's career advancement.

Recommendation

As this study established that family responsibilities are a significant barrier to women's career development, bank employers are recommended to promote diversity and encourage their top executives to motivate their subordinates to foster diversity within organizations. There are several options that can be used by the banks to support their female employees such as the establishment of good quality and affordable in-house childcare centres. Banks

could also provide flexible working hours and family friendly initiatives (Jamali et al., 2006) to women with young children. Flexible work arrangements are crucial to both male and female employees as they contribute to work-family harmonization. Additionally, banks could give extended paternity leave to male employees so they could have more time to support their spouses with family matters such as childcare and household chores. Additionally, employers are also encouraged to practice gender diversity and equity by hiring more women and simply targeting more female representation in top management positions.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

In this study, a few implications are identified to be explored and carried out in future research. Firstly, the selected barriers for this study were limited to three variables only. Therefore, further study should be conducted on other factors to be better able to generalize the results in terms of perceived barriers that hamper career growth of female employees. Secondly, the current research study was restricted to the banking industry. Further research can be performed in various industries such as tourism, hospitality, etc, where there may be other challenges affecting women's performance and career growth. Thirdly, the unit of analysis for this study is limited to female employees. Future research should include male employees as their opinion might differ from the female employees. Lastly, further research can be done using both quantitative and qualitative methods to get more precise results. Interviews would allow the authors of any future study to get better and direct feedback from participants as there will be opportunities and flexibility with the voicing of their subject's opinions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of perceived barriers that impede women's career advancement in the banking industry in Klang Valley which leads to the under-representation of women in top management positions. The results showed that family responsibilities is the only variable in this study that has a negative effect on women's career progression in banks. Thus, it is concluded that family responsibilities are a serious barrier to women's career progression that subsequently causes under-representation of women in top management positions. As work-life balance and lack of mentoring did not yield significant effects we are unable to make similar conclusions. It is noted that the government and employers play an important role in facilitating female employees to attain leadership positions. Consequently, this paper also suggested some best practices to enhance female employees to be more focused on developing their career. This includes governmental policies and increased awareness towards gender discrimination and diversity. Bank employers are encouraged to create more women-friendly environments and to promote



gender equity whereby they could hire more women and strive to improve their employees work-family balance.

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