

## **WOMEN AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN WORKPLACE : A MYTH OR REALITY?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Discrimination is an anti-social offence. It is related to any distinction, exclusion or preference made up on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity of treatment in employment or occupation (International Labor Office, 1968). In Malaysia, there has always been a big question whether women holding managerial positions are being discriminated. Although it is difficult to assess the real extent of the discrimination, it is believed to exist. This paper investigates whether this kind of discrimination occurs in workplace with a focus on female executives in private sectors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Discrimination is seen and regarded as an anti-social offence. It is related to any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national extraction or social origin, which has the effect of nullifying or impairing equality of opportunity of treatment in employment or occupation (International Labor Office, 1968). Discrimination in employment is said to be widespread. It occurs in numerous ways and taking a variety of forms such as recognition, remuneration, decision-making, and vocational guidance and training.

In Malaysia, there has always been a big question of whether women holding managerial positions in the private sector are being discriminated or not. It is something that is seldom talked about but hardly documented. Thus, it is difficult to assess the real extent of the discrimination, although it is believed to exist.

Therefore, this study intends to find out whether discrimination against females does exist in the workplace. For the purpose of this study, the word discrimination here will only focus on recognition and decision-making of female executives in the private sector.

## REVIEWS ON DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

In Malaysia, women comprise 35.5 per cent of the workforce (General Report Census, 1991). They reflect the rapid entry of women into the workforce since independence. Although most women have remained concentrated in the traditional occupations such as teaching, nursing and clerical work, a lot more have begun to move into those fields of occupation that were traditionally considered belong to the male's world.

More women, including those with young children, have elected to enter the workforce and remain at work for the same reason as men do – to satisfy personal needs and ambitions as well as to meet financial needs. In addition, the wide availability of education, training and child-care centres make entering the workforce increasingly attractive and desirable for women, not to mention the demand of the high cost of living nowadays.

With a rising participation in higher education among women, more have high qualifications enabling them to seek white-collar, managerial and professional employment, rather than blue-collar jobs (Bittel, 1978).

Although women have increased their participation in the labour force, some are claimed to remain under represented in high-paying jobs. Hamid Arshat and Masitah Mohd Yatin (1989) pointed out that equal pay for equal work has not been legally adopted in Malaysia. The concept of equal pay and equal work has been implemented in the public sector, nevertheless, in the private sector women employees are still subjected to discrimination in pay.

Along the same line, Rahmah Ismail and Zaini Mabar (1996) in their book "Wanita dan Pekerjaan" state that the pay for men is considerably higher than the pay for female employees. Besides that, women continue to hold the type of jobs that pay less than male-dominated jobs in spite of the changing moves and laws.

In the same vein, Napsiah Omar (1991), as quoted in the *Utusan Malaysia*, states that only 12% of the 35.5% total female employees hold the executive positions. And from that percentage, it seems that female employees are less fortunate than their male counterparts in terms of the types of jobs they hold which are related to the amount of money they earned.

This phenomenon has probably persevered that the Wanita UMNO Chief at the time, Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman, reiterated in the 1998 UMNO general assembly that the movement's stand adopted that 30 per cent of women must hold policy and decision-making positions by the year 2005 (*New Straits Times*, 1998).

There have been many cases and stories reported about discrimination in the office in Western countries especially when they involve women in managerial level. For example, the Chief Commissioner of the Canadian Human Right firmly states that women would not have a fair and equal place in Canadian Society until the federal government deals with the issues of pay equity (Balkan, 1996). This is stated in relation to the hard evidence from the 1995 Annual Report of the Canadian Human Rights Commission that the wage gap between men and women still exists in Canada. In a survey conducted by Statistics Canada, it was found that out of 524 occupations,

513 men earned more than women, and another study found that women made seventy cents for every dollar earned by men (Balkan, 1996).

Another example pointing to the discrimination of the female executives is a case between the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in *Dunn Dyer v. ANZ Banking Group Ltd.* In this case, a female applicant, who is a managerial employee, was awarded \$135,000 damages in a sexual discrimination claim. The Hearing Commissioner, upon being provided a detailed account of discriminatory treatment that she received during her period of employment with the bank, found that she was constituted discrimination on the grounds of her sex (Hearing Commissioner Kein, 1997).

Having looked at these examples, there seems to be a strong ground for the need to find out whether discrimination against females really occurs in private sectors. The findings can be of use to educate the society of the existence of such cases and help them to overcome the issue if such problem happens at their workplace.

### **THE STUDY : MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The purpose of the study is to find out whether discrimination against female executives really occurs in the Malaysian private sector. The population of this study was female executives working in the private sectors located at Tan & Tan Building, PNB Bulding and Lembaga Tabung Haji Building along Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur.

The sample size was 60% (30) of the whole population. The sampling technique used was cluster sampling, with an estimation that on average, there was only one female executive in each organization. The number of female executive needed was determined by dividing sample size (30) and size of cluster was one :

$$30/1 = 30 \text{ clusters}$$

The organization was selected randomly using the table of random numbers. All female executives in the selected private organizations were the respondents. However, only 25 out of the selected 30 respondents responded to the survey.

In acquiring the data, a questionnaire consisting of close-ended and open-ended questions on discrimination in workplace were distributed to each female executive. The findings were analyzed by calculating the mean and using percentages.

### RESULTS

The findings of this study are based on the responses given to the questionnaires and presented in the tabular form for each question.

1. What do you understand of the word discrimination?

RESPONSE	Frequency	%
a. It's not a Malaysian culture	1	2.4
b. Part of office politics	8	19.0
c. A normal agenda to happen	5	11.9
d. A serious matter	8	19.0
e. A sensitive issue	9	21.4
f. A silent crime	10	23.9
g. Others (Please specify)	1	2.4
TOTAL	42	100

2. How frequent have you heard about discrimination in the workplace?

RESPONSE	Frequency	%
a. Often	13	52
b. Sometimes	12	48
TOTAL	25	100

3. I have heard / known someone who has been discriminated

RESPONSE	frequency	%
a. Yes	15	60
b. No	10	40
TOTAL	25	100

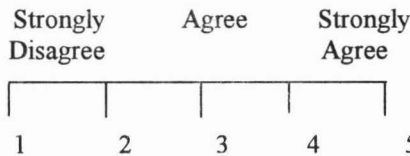
4. Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following questions :

RESPONSE	AGREE		DISAGREE		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%		
a. Sex discrimination happens more frequently than other kinds of discrimination (eg. race, religion, colour, etc.)	9	36	16	64	25	100
b. Female executives are usually being discriminated in a workplace than male executives.	17	68	8	32	25	100
c. Sex discrimination really happens without any action being taken.	17	68	8	32	25	100

5. The forms of sex discrimination I usually hear or know is / are as follows:

RESPONSE	Frequency	%
a. Recognition (eg Males usually get better opportunity of promotion than females)	19	41.3
b. Recruitment (eg Hiring less female workers than male)	10	21.7
c. Decision-making (eg ideas from female workers are always being ignored)	9	19.6
d. Remuneration (eg The difference in salary increment)	4	8.7
e. Conditions of Employment (eg Benefits more towards male employees)	4	8.7
TOTAL	46	100

6. Sex discrimination happens most during :



RESPONSE	1		2		3		4		5		Ex	x
	f	x	f	x	f	X	f	x	f	x		
a. Selection process for recruitment at entry level	2	2	5	10	13	39	2	8	3	15	74	2.96
b. Promotion exercise	4	4	4	8	5	15	4	16	8	40	83	3.32
c. Delegation of authority	3	3	5	10	9	27	2	8	6	30	78	3.12
d. Evaluation of work performance	5	5	3	6	11	33	3	12	3	13	69	2.76

N = 25

$$\text{Mean } (x) = \frac{EX}{N}$$

7. In your opinion, should the act of discrimination be drawn and enacted in Malaysia?

RESPONSE	frequency	%
a. strongly agree	14	56
b. agree	10	40
c. disagree	1	4
d. strongly disagree	-	-
TOTAL	25	100

8. Listed below are the factors that may influence decision-making of promotion for managerial level. Please rank by placing 1 as the most important and 8 as the least important.

RESPONSE	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		Ex	x
	f	x	F	x	f	x	f	x	f	x	f	x	f	x	f	x		
a. Academic Professional Qualification	7	7	4	8	4	12	2	8	4	20	1	6	1	7	-	-	68	2.72
b. Working Experience	5	5	10	20	5	15	1	4	1	5	-	-	-	-	1	8	57	2.28
c. Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4	4	2	10	60	4	28	6	48	150	6.0
d. Perception that leader should be male	-	-	1	2	1	3	2	8	1	5	2	12	9	63	7	56	149	5.96
e. Office politics	2	2	-	-	2	6	-	-	1	5	7	42	5	35	6	48	138	5.52
f. Recommendation of influential high level personnel	-	-	2	4	4	12	5	20	9	45	-	-	2	14	1	8	103	4.12
g. Work performance evaluation	8	8	2	4	5	8	4	16	1	5	1	6	1	7	1	8	62	2.48
h. Recommendation of previous Head of Department	1	1	4	8	2	6	8	32	4	20	2	12	1	7	1	8	94	3.76

### CONCLUSIONS

This study only focused on female executives working in the selected multinational companies at the office buildings along Jalan Tun Razak. Thus, caution should be taken into consideration as the findings were only limited in its generalization to the participated group only. Thus, the findings do not represent the whole population of women managerial employees in Malaysia.

The findings suggest that the word discriminations is looked upon as a serious matter. Most of the respondents understand the word discriminations as part of office politics and regard it as a sensitive issue.

The findings also report that the forms of sex discrimination are practised with regards to the promotion exercise and selection process for recruitment at entry level, as well as evaluation of work performance. It is seen that male employees usually get better opportunity for promotion than female employees and in the level of recruitment, less females are hired than their male counterparts.

Another obvious form of discrimination is the delegation of authority. The perception that leaders should be male, is said to be among the top rankings that may influence the decision-making for promotion of managerial level.

Almost all of the respondents agreed to the enactment of discrimination act in Malaysia. This is because such discrimination promotes unhealthy working environment. The personal uniqueness of each employee is an asset of inculcable worth. It is the responsibility of all to create a working environment which is free of discrimination, where all employees are given the opportunity to develop, perform and advance to their maximum potential without any discrimination regardless of race, national origin, colour, sex, age, religion, or disability.

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