

ENTANGLED IN STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS? A CASE STUDY ON WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The Glass Ceiling issue in a business case contributes to women remain disproportionately underrepresented in management positions. This study believes that structural and cultural barriers are the main blocks inhibiting their advancement in the corporate ladder. This paper provides an analysis of structural and cultural as an indicator of women's leadership in university. It discovers that women appear to be more likely as leaders in structural than cultural setting. Hence, this paper reveals the vital role of an organisation to promote women in leadership positions by employing strategies that are compatible with the culture's tightness.

Keywords: cultural barriers, glass ceiling, leadership, structural barriers, women's leadership

INTRODUCTION

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The glass ceiling concept, a metaphor first introduced in the 1980s, refers to a barrier hindering women from securing top positions equally as men. (The Glass Ceiling Effect, 2001). This situation exacerbates in the countries exercising patriarchal system or patriarchy societies, such as Japan; they underestimate women abilities to be leaders as they do not have confidence for women to lead. They perceive that only men are competent to be leaders, and women should stay behind men as supporters (Paustian, 2014).

This gender inequality is also materialised in Malaysian organisations in which 51% of 200 Malaysians surveyed stated that organisations do not have an adequate number of female leaders (Chin, 2016). In contrast, the number of female leaders in

developed countries, such as the United States, is expanding even though the amount is relatively small compared to male leaders (Geiger, 2017). A survey by Stevenson (2017) showed that in the United States, only 6.4% of the CEO position in companies is filled with female employees. On the other hand, China has the highest percentage of 51% for women in top positions in 2013. This phenomenon shows that, while the corporate world is still mainly dominated by the opposite gender, which is men, women have proven to make significant changes slowly over time.

Due to gender disparities, prejudice and stereotype issues are frequently discussed and reported among reporters and society. Most scholars found that women are underrepresented due to the belief that they are incompetent. Theories, such as role congruity and lack of fit model, also found that women are facing barriers to attain top roles in organisations due to the stereotype thinking that women are not effective in these roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002, Heilman, 2001).

Subsequently, various alternative measures are taken by the government and organisations to raise the level of women representation as leaders. Back in 2011, the Malaysian government has practised the policy of filling 30% women as board members in the government-linked companies (GLCs), government-linked investment companies (GLIC) as well as in the statutory. The Malaysian government has exceeded the target of 30% female employees at the highest positions in the managerial level when 34% of them are now in the policy-making level in the public sector, as of December 2017 (Ismail, 2017). However, in the corporate sector, Malaysia is close to achieving the target set, as it has only achieved 29.9% (Idris, 2018).

Collectively, this research aims at investigating the role of structure and culture as a predictor to women's leadership. Building from a theoretical and literature review, a conceptual framework is developed to investigate the relationship between leadership style, education, and organisational culture as predictors to women capabilities as leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Congruity Theory

Under the paradigm of prejudice, the reality is viewed through the lens of gender role and incongruity between the female role and gender role. Gender role can be explained from descriptive and injunctive aspects. On the one hand, the descriptive aspect of gender distinguishes the women characteristics as communal, which attributes are more towards human and relationship-centric—for example, affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle. On the other hand, men are more associated with agentic characteristics, described primarily as an assertive, controlling, and the confident tendency—for example, aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, self-sufficient, self-confident, and prone to act as a leader. The violations of following the descriptive aspect render women to be put in injunctive positions and hence be regarded as incongruent between the female role and gender role. It is due to women involving in leadership positions may possess the opposite qualities of approved communal characteristics, from gentle to quarrelsome, interpersonally sensitive to selfish, affectionate to devious, and kind to bitter (Eagle and Karau, 2002; Heilman et al., 1995).

Lack of Fit Model

According to Heilman's Lack of Fit model (See Figure 1), perceivers infer that there is a misfit between perceived attributes of women and perceived male-typed positions requirements. Women are seen to be not only communal but also not *agentic*. Agentic derives its words from the term 'agency'. Agentic image is found in men demonstrating respectiveness, assertiveness, competitiveness, bold, independence, courageousness, and is masterful in achieving their tasks at hand. In contrast, women are thought to be relationship-oriented, nurturing, and kind. These agentic characteristics are seen to be necessary for performing the role of a leader. These gender stereotypes are not only found in gender attributes but also information processing aspect. Women are viewed to tend to be biased while making decisions concerning applicants and employees. They are self-perpetuating, skewing information processing in a direction that validates decision-makers' initial stereotypic beliefs. Thus, the

evaluation made by women can be more emotion-centric than cognitive-centric (Heilman, 1983).

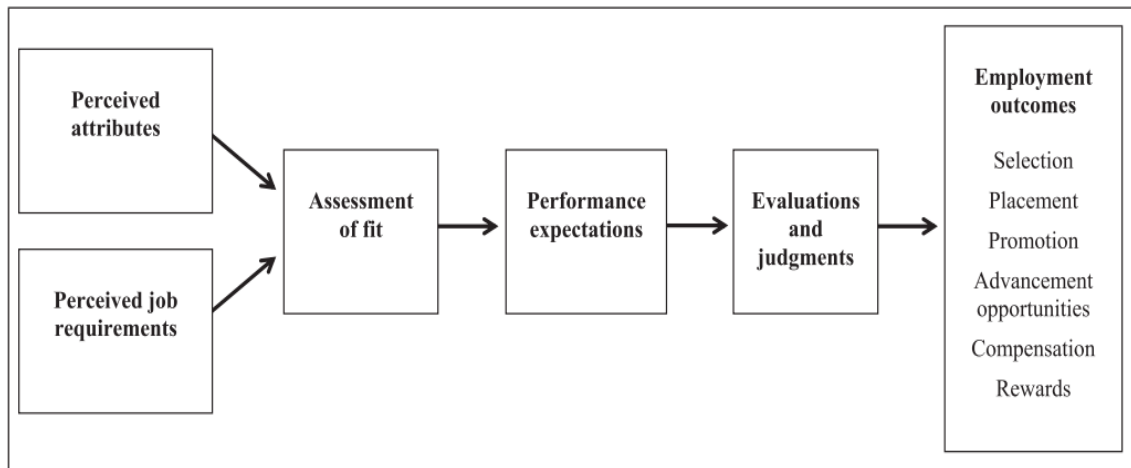


Figure 1: Lack-of-Fit Model (Heilman, 1983)

Women’s Leadership Scenario in Malaysia

Given women participation initiatives, there have been significant efforts undertaken in Malaysia. An example is an appointment of Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail as the first female Deputy Prime Minister, subsequent to the 14th General Election held on 9th May 2018. The appointment shows that women begin to hold a place in high positions as long as they are qualified for their positions. 80% of businesses in Malaysia now have at least one woman in their senior management team, as compared to the global average of 75% (New Straits Times, 2018). Meanwhile, the percentage of women in senior management has increased to 28% this year from 24% in 2017. Gender equality policies are now widespread in Malaysia with 82% of businesses adopting equal pay for men and women performing the same roles and 66% implementing non-discrimination policies for recruitment (New Straits Times, 2018).

Structural Setting

Previous research found several structural settings affecting women’s leadership. These include leadership styles and education. Among the leadership styles are

participative, autocratic, transactional, transformational, bureaucratic, and charismatic leadership styles (Amanchukwu, 2015). Among all the leadership styles mentioned, this paper focuses on the discussion of transformational leadership style.

Leadership style refers to approaches or methods chosen by leaders to be adopted in organisations to motivate employees to achieve targeted goals. Transformational leadership style is a leadership style emphasising on positive changes in individual or organisation system. Leaders practising this leadership style enhance motivation and good performance among their employees in various ways. Being a role model to the followers with good leadership characteristics, such as emphatic, determine together with employees in achieving goals.

Numerous scholars, such as Lowe (1996) and Avolio (2009), concur the positive relationship between transformational leadership style and women's leadership. It is due to leaders practising transformational leadership style are approachable and friendly to their employees. Moreover, transformational leaders tend to encourage employees to see problems from different views as long as they communicate through the same shared vision in the organisation. The study concludes that by practising transformational leadership, it will eventually increase the women capabilities as leaders and simultaneously will improve the employees' performance and satisfaction level.

In contrast, no association was found between transformational leadership style and women's leadership due to situation-related variables, such as misperception and role conflict. Many studies showed that by practising the transformational leadership style and its dimensions, women could also be good leaders. Nevertheless, there is a misperception that women are more suitable to be at home, taking care of their family, than men who has to work to support the family's daily expenditures (Miginnis, 2016). Another barrier hindering women from accessing and practising leadership is their multiple conflicting roles as women (Thuy, 2011). Women have to juggle between works and family chores. Although they have to work, they also have to look after their family, especially their children, attached with house chores, make a living, and take part in community activities. Balancing them makes the burden very heavy.

Education-wise, there is a significant relationship between education and women capabilities as leaders. Many studies have discussed it as one of the factors affecting women capabilities as leaders. Leaders, with the right education, will have the proper

knowledge and skills to understand their responsibilities and able to carry out duties efficiently (Swinney, 2017). This study is consistent with a previous study conducted by Zhong (2013), stating that educational qualification influences women's career advancement and enable them to fill up the management positions.

However, a study conducted by Kattan (2016) showed that the result was contradicted with many studies. In Saudi Arabia, although the government encourages the women enrolment to study at various levels, and the number keeps increasing over time, there are still low in the number of women involved in the labour force. Most women in Saudi Arabia work in the public sector, and they do not engage with men working fields, requiring more technical activities. Halpern (2010) said that even women get a high qualification in education, they still have to overcome the barrier preventing them from being leaders, which is culture. The early culture emphasised that women to be at home, nurture children, and do house chores (Waller, 2016). Men, as the head of the family, should be working (Miginnis, 2016). The culture about men should be leaders makes women less favourable compared to men, although they perform better. Women are not encouraged to get high education because at the end of the day when they get married, they will stay at home and the qualification will go to waste.

The above leads this paper to formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive relationship between the structural setting and women's leadership.

Cultural Setting

Organisational culture can be defined as a shared pattern of human behaviour in the organisation studied, and assumed as good adaptation and integration of the organisation in solving problems and eventually being taught to new members of the organisation as a correct way of thinking and feeling (Kawatra, 2004). There are two types of culture that are internal culture and external culture. Internal culture reflects the culture within the organisation; meanwhile, external culture shows the social culture derived from outside of the organisation (Kattan, 2016). Among the examples of organisational culture elements are values practised by employees, the working environment in the organisation, and cultural network.

Research by Kawarau Kawatra (2004) indicated that women's leadership is better in an organisational culture associated with attributes such as open communication, less control from leaders, and rewarding employees. The result showed that more employees favour working under women leaders practising the transformational leadership component, which is charismatic. Bailey (2014) coincided this view by stating that women's leadership are rated higher in terms of effectiveness than men by their employees due to the presence of motivation and rewards commonly offered in the transformational leadership style culture.

While discussing the relationship between culture and women's leadership, different researchers indicate culture complexity. Johns (2013) argued that culture has a negative relationship with women's leadership due to glass ceiling barriers. It is especially true in a culture supporting bias and prejudice as well as colour-based differences. Karau (2002) posited that the higher the culture of prejudice between the women characteristics and the leadership role requirements, the lower the chances of women to be in the top management. In other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, culture also hinders women from attaining top positions (Kattan, 2016). It is because their culture emphasises more on men rights and liberties in which they adhere to the preset standard that only men can become leaders. Other proponents also found a negative link between culture and women's leadership due to the presence of gender inequality (Longman, 2018), the practice of discrimination in the promotion of female employees regardless of their higher competencies and good educational background compared to men (Othman, 2015).

It leads to the following testable hypothesis:

H2: There is a positive relationship between cultural setting and women's leadership.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study opted for a quantitative survey and a cross-sectional study. Concerning the sampling design, this study employed the non-probability sampling method, which is convenience sampling. It is due to the data collection was conducted

at a specific time of the day; thus, not all respondents had an equal chance to be selected, as they were not available at that time.

Sample

Academic staff was chosen as the sample for this study because it presents an interesting case, as the percentage of women leaders reduces significantly in an academic working environment (Awang-Hashim et al., 2016). This phenomenon may impede the potential that women have in contributing to positive and unique experiences, which they will not have under gender-homogenous leadership. Furthermore, the presence of women in leadership roles in higher education institutions will have a significant influence on institutions' knowledge and scope of research (White House Project, 2009).

Data Collection

The data of this study was obtained from questionnaires distributed to the academic staff of three different faculties, namely Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies (FSPPP), Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences (FSKM), and Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation (FSR).

Data Analysis

Based on the two categories of questions in the questionnaire, there were two types of data, namely technical service data and non-technical service data. The collected data were analysed by using descriptive statistical data analysis and multiple regression analysis. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses set earlier.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Respondents Profile

No	Profile	Number of respondents (No.)	Frequency (%)
1	Gender		
	Male	29	25.2
	Female	86	74.8
2	Age		
	20-30 years old	13	11.3
	31-40 years old	66	57.4
	41-50 years old	35	30.4
	51-60 years old	1	0.9
3	Race		
	Malay	115	100
	Chinese		
	Indian		
	Others		
4	Education level		
	Diploma		
	Bachelor's Degree		
	Master's Degree	108	93.9
	PhD	7	6.1
5	Faculty		
	FSPPP	51	44.3
	FSKM	52	45.2
	FSR	12	10.4
6	Working experience		
	1-5 years	28	24.3
	6-10 years	56	48.7
	11-15 years	25	21.7
	16-20 years	4	3.5
	21 years and above	2	1.7

Based on Table 1, most respondents were female, which is 74.8%, followed by male 25.2%. 11.3% of the respondents were 20-30 years old, 57.4% were 31-40 years old, 30.4% were 41-50 years old, and 0.9% were 51-60 years old. 100% of the respondents were Malay. None of the respondents was Diploma and Bachelor's degree holders, while 93.9% of the respondents were Master's degree holders and 6.1% possessed PhD qualification. From all the three different faculties, 44.3% of the respondents were from FSPPP, 45.2% from FSKM and 10.4% were from FSR. Concerning the working experience, 48.7% of the respondents have worked for 6-10

years, followed by 24.3% for 1-5 years, 21.7% for 11-15 years, 3.5% for 16-20 years, and finally 1.7% for 21 years and above.

Normality Test

Table 2: *Normality test summary*

Variables	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
DV_Women's leadership	3.9087	0.61446	-0.127	-0.260
IV1_Structural setting				
Leadership style	3.7391	0.69443	-0.048	-0.877
Education	4.2157	0.50343	-0.379	0.141
IV2_Cultural setting	3.7948	0.44600	-0.276	0.563

Table 2 depicts that all values fall between -2 and 2, signifying that the dependent variable and independent variables are normally distributed.

Table 3: *Pearson's Correlation between structural setting and cultural setting with women's leadership*

Variable	Pearson Correlation	P Value Sig.(1-tailed)
DV_Women's leadership		
IV_Structural setting		
Leadership style	0.541***	0.000
Education	0.599***	0.000
IV_Cultural setting	0.238***	0.005

Sample size = 115

Based on findings in Table 3, it can be seen that there is a significant and moderate positive relationship between structural setting and women's leadership, with the value of ($r=0.541$), $p=0.000$ for leadership style, and ($r=0.599$), $p=0.000$ for education. Therefore, H1 is supported. As for the independent variable of cultural setting, there is a significant and low relationship with women's leadership ($r=0.238$), $p=0.005$. Therefore, H2 is also supported.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies have explored and found positive relationships between women's leadership and the structural setting of leadership style (Amanchukwu, 2015; Lowe, 1996; and Avolio, 2009), the structural setting of education level (Swinney, 2017

and Zhong, 2013) and cultural setting (Bailey, 2014 and Kawatra, 2004). The findings of this study are consistent with those studies.

This study also found that there is a significant relationship between structural setting of leadership style and women's leadership. A study carried out by Lowe (1996) supports this result. He further discussed the transformational leadership style that is always associated and significant with women leaders. Besides, he came into a conclusion that by practising transformational leadership, it will eventually increase women's leadership participation and simultaneously improve the employees' performance and their satisfaction level.

Concerning the structural setting of education level, the findings of this study also support the significant positive relationship between education and women's leadership. It is consistent with the findings of many studies stating that education level is one of the factors affecting women capabilities as leaders. By obtaining the right education, leaders will have the necessary knowledge and skills to comprehend their responsibilities and able to perform their duties efficiently (Swinney, 2017). This study is also consistent with Zhong (2013), who highlighted that educational qualification has a significant influence on women's career advancement, enabling them to fill up the management positions.

Cultural setting is also found to be significantly related to women's leadership due to their attributes, such as open communication, less control from leaders, and rewarding employees, making them favourable in the eyes of the employees (Kawatra, 2004). The significant positive relationship also coincides with the view of Bailey (2014), stating that employees rate women's leadership higher than men in terms of effectiveness due to the presence of motivation and rewards commonly offered in the transformational leadership style culture.

CONCLUSION

Among the two factors (structural and cultural setting) being studied, structural has become the most significant influence on women capabilities as leaders. Most of the respondents agreed that women should possess good education background and leadership style to be leaders. In contrast, culture was seen not significantly influence

women's leadership capabilities. For future studies, researchers may highlight other possible factors, such as communication, decision making, and skills, as variables that can influence women capabilities as leaders.

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