

Women in the Workforce

Rabeatul Husna Abdull Rahman

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Abstract

This article reviews the participation of female employees in the Malaysian labour market. It seeks to highlight female significance and contribution towards Malaysian economy. The Malaysian government has projected an increase of female in the workforce in order to achieve a high-income nation by the year 2020; however female employees are still underutilized in the Malaysian labour market compared to male. This article discusses various issues and challenges faced by female employees particularly concerning sexist human resource practices in the recruitment, appraisal, as well as in the benefits and compensation practices.

Keywords: women/female workforce, sexist human resource practices, recruitment, appraisal, benefits and compensation.

9. Introduction

As Malaysia progresses towards achieving its Vision 2020, new labour issues have emerged, as this article documents. Women, for example, continue to experience disadvantage in many aspects of their employment. Despite an upward trend of women with tertiary education, nevertheless, according to a report published by UNDP (2014) women's participation in the workforce remains "exceptionally low when compared to neighbouring or developing countries of lesser income levels". The purpose of this article is two-fold. This article begins by reviewing the participation of women and their contribution towards Malaysian economy. It then discusses the possible factors underpinning the issue of gender disparity, lower participation rate, and unemployment of qualified and experienced women.

10. Participation and contribution of women

DOS (2014) reported that women participation has slightly increased in 2013 from 49.5% in 2012 to 52.4% in 2013. In terms of age, the participation is more among women in the 25-34 age group. By sectors, the number of women employed in the service and sales workers category has increased 17% compared to only 2.7 increment for men participation. According to UNDP (2014) male workers are highly concentrated in construction, and motor repair and trade whereby more female workers can be found in the service sector. In terms of business ownership, some 19.7% of SMEs were owned by women, also mostly in the service sector (UNDP, 2014). In 2013, three job categories were dominated by women; professional, clerical support workers, and service and sales workers. Significant difference can be seen in these categories whereby male-female participation in the professional category is 6.9% and 14.3%, in the clerical support worker category is 3.9% and 17.4%, and in the service and sales workers category is 17.9% and 27.9% (DOS, 2014). The higher number of women in the professional category compared to men is consistent with their educational attainment. DOS (2014) reported that 48% of employed women in Malaysia in 2013 are tertiary educated.

Although more women than men are employed in these three sectors, as compared to men, women unemployment rate was higher (3.4%) in 2013. Moreover majority of the population outside the labour force were also women - approximately 4.67 million people. DOS (2014) reported that two main reasons for not seeking work were 'housework' and 'schooling'. The second reason is not surprising as the report also revealed that the highest unemployment rate was recorded by youth below 20 years. A more interesting data reported by DOS (2014) is the increment of population outside the labour force with tertiary education (increased 1.7%), and also among those with working experience (increased 0.3%). The percentage of women in these populations however is unknown. Nevertheless these data suggests a need to continue attracting and retaining the population outside the labour force especially among educated and experienced workforce.

Generally, these data has highlighted the significance of women's contribution to the Malaysian economy. Their dominance in the professional work category suggests that more women than men are working as engineers, lawyers, doctors, accountants etc. Professionals are often characterised as knowledge workers, vital to

the development of the knowledge economy (Abdull Rahman, 2012a). Furthermore in 2013, nearly 30% of employed women were employed in the service sector (DOS, 2014). The service sector is considered as the largest sector of the Malaysian economy, contributing to around 55% of the country's gross domestic product (The Star, 2014). This signifies the importance of women contribution to the country.

The government of Malaysia recognises women contribution to the economy through the National Women Policy. This policy was first introduced in 1989 which was then revised in 2009 to ensure an equitable sharing of resources and benefits of development for both men and women. In specific, the policy aims to develop women's capabilities as the change catalyst in all sectors, providing a conducive working environment that are more women-friendly, and to increase and reinforce fair and just treatment towards both men and women (KPWKM, 2011). As a result, female participation rate in the labour force has increased especially among the tertiary educated (Ismail, 2014).

Despite the assurance of the National Women Policy, as well as other national policies such as the legalisation of flexi-work, from 60-day to 90-day maternity leave for women in the public sector, tax deduction to employers providing childcare facilities for their female workers (UNDP, 2014) etc., in reality, however, women still face many other obstacles in the workplace. There are many evidence in the literature that suggest women in the workforce are treated with sexist human resource practices such as in the recruitment, appraisal, as well as in the benefits and compensation practices. If these issues are not addressed effectively, they could hinder women participation and retention in the workforce. According to Abdull Rahman (2012a), certain HR practices can be used to attract, develop as well as retain the employees. This includes training and career development opportunities, provision of flexible working arrangements, equitable rewards, and fair performance appraisal.

11. Gender Discrimination in Human Resource Practices

In a recent report published by the MTUC (2014), it is reported that women shy away from the workforce mainly due to gender discrimination. In specific, Malaysian women received a lower pay than men, they are denied entry into certain occupation such as in technical and engineering field, and they have limited opportunity to advance in their career. This finding is also consistent with Chee Din, Rahmat, Mashudi (2011) and Othman (2012).

Discrimination in Recruitment Practice

This article presents two types of discrimination in recruitment practice. Firstly, companies tend to have a higher preference towards hiring male than female particularly for technical and engineering jobs, and secondly, some companies' recruitment policy prohibits entry of pregnant women.

Despite the increasing number of female undertaking technical and engineering courses in higher institutions (Tapsir & Mohd. Noor, 2005), according to Esa, Sapon & Ibrahim (2001), male still dominated the field. Esa, Sapon & Ibrahim (2001) suggested that the industry have a higher tendency to hire male than female engineering graduates as the females are lacking of hands-on skills. They conducted a study towards female electrical engineering students in a polytechnic to investigate female students' likelihood to participate in hands-on activity. Apparently the study found that male students tend to dominate hands-on activity in class, whereby female students prefer to take part in recoding data and writing the reports. As a result, women have lower readiness level towards career than men (Walker & Tracey, 2012). This calls for efforts at the tertiary institution level to adapt their programs in order to encourage female students' active participation and involvement in hands-on activity in the class. However, because engineering is still stereotyped as a predominantly masculine profession (Cech, 2005), more support are needed to enhance female self-efficacy. According to Andrews & Clark (2012) among the factors contributing to lower participation of women in the engineering field is their low confidence level, the lack of women mentors and their perception that they will be unable to manage work and family commitments. Increased self-efficacy is thus important for women to be successful in their career especially in male-dominated profession such as the engineering field (Ballout, 2009).

Pregnancy discrimination is not alien in Malaysia. In 2014, a woman was awarded MYR300000 in damages for breach of her constitutional right to gender equality after the government refused to employ her as a temporary teacher when she became pregnant (The Malay Mail, 2014). Although this case signifies bright hopes for equal rights for women in Malaysia, the ruling of this case does not apply to private companies. In specific, private companies are not held liable for breach of constitutional rights (referring to the Beatrice Fernandez case in which a former Malaysia Airlines flight stewardess sued the airline when it fired her after she became pregnant and refused to resign). Beatrice Fernandez case raised concerns of the weaknesses pertaining to

Malaysian gender equality law particularly for private sector workforce (Chee Din, Rahmat, Mashudi, 2011). Until better laws are implemented, women are not protected by law for any discrimination due to pregnancy particularly in employment.

Unfair Performance Appraisal and Career Advancement Opportunities

Although more women than men are working in the professional job category and are tertiary educated (DOS, 2014), women are still under-represented in leadership position (Subramaniam & Arumugam, 2013). Among the barriers to women career progression in Malaysian firms are family related barriers (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008), negative stereotype (Subramaniam & Arumugam, 2013), work-life balance (Lim, 2013), and sexist performance appraisal practice (Abdull Rahman, 2012b). Whilst family related barriers and work-life balance barrier can be minimized by organization providing more support such as flexible working arrangements, and quality childcare at the workplace (UNDP, 2014), sexist performance appraisal practice is a top concern as it highlights unfair employment treatment and companies wrong doings.

Abdull Rahman (2012b) has conducted a study towards Malaysian engineers' intention to stay and leave factors. Her study revealed that gender discrimination existed in Malaysian firms. One of the interview participant claimed the delay in her promotion was due to the sexist practice of her manager:

I was supposed to be promoted to E1 position in 2004-2005 but instead I got promoted in 2008. Once, I had an Indian manager. I asked him to justify his reason for not promoting me and he claimed it was because of the company's quota (the company's policy only allows every department to promote 20 per cent of its employees annually). But what made me angry was when he said that the second reason was because I fell pregnant every year (in 2002, 2004 and 2005). (Ms Nor)

This finding again, highlights pregnancy related discrimination in the performance appraisal practice. Since this conflict occur in a private engineering firm, the victim however is not protected against workplace discrimination by the Malaysian labour law.

From a different perspective, women opportunities for career advancement seem to be highly contingent on their readiness, years of education and working experience. Selamat (2009) conducted a study towards 107 career women with technical education background in manufacturing industry sector in selected districts in Johor to investigate their readiness for leadership position. The findings of his study suggest that the readiness level in knowledge, skill, and work experience among the respondents is generally at moderate level. Consequently, male have a better chance at being promoted than women. This highlights the need for women to continuously equip themselves with current and future competencies suited to the needs of the industry in order to increase their career advancement opportunities.

Unequal Benefits and Compensation

In 2013, DOS, Malaysia published the salaries and wages survey report which reports data collected from January to June 2012. The mean monthly salaries and wages of male (MYR1906) was higher than female (MYR1838) with 3.6% of gender wage gap. In terms of salaries and wages by occupation, DOS (2013) reported that managers received the highest mean and median monthly salaries and wages of MYR5213 and MYR4000, followed by professionals at MYR3807 and MYR3440 respectively. The distribution by occupation showed that male workers earn more than female in terms of mean monthly salaries and wages. Gender wage gap was high (more than 30%) in the following categories of occupation; service and sales workers, skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers, craft and related trade workers, and plant and machine-operators and assemblers. This implies that men are earning significantly more wages than women in these categories of occupation. It is imperative to take immediate action particularly to address the gender wage differentials in the service and sale sector. This sector is predominantly dominated by female workforce (DOS, 2014), and is the largest contributor to Malaysian economy (The Star, 2014). As such, it is reasonable to suggest that continued attraction and retention of women in this sector relies strongly on equitable rewards and compensation benefits.

Moreover, since women is less likely to be holding leadership and key position in the organisational hierarchy as compared to men (UNDP, 2014), they continue to lag behind men in terms of remuneration. The UNDP report indicated that male-female wage disparities are wider in low to medium skilled jobs such as production line or craft worker, and also larger between high-earning male professionals and high-earning

female professionals. The latter could be a strong barrier factor for tertiary educated women to enter, as well as to continue being employed in the workforce. According to Ismail & Jajri (2012), discriminatory practices in Malaysian firms are one of the contributing factors towards gender wage differentials. In their study towards 4535 working male and females in Peninsular Malaysia, they found that gender wage gap between male and female can be explained by training, experience and education. This finding suggests that to reduce the salary gap, women may pursue higher education, increase their competencies by attending training and development programs, as well as undertake challenging work assignments to enrich their working experience. This suggestion is consistent with Ismail (2011).

Othman (2012) conducted a study to examine gender discrimination in the Malaysian private sector. His study also reported evidence of wage differentials between men and women, whereby men received 54.8% more wages than women. Men also received 3.3% more non-monetary benefits than women, which includes uniforms and transportation. Interestingly, the study also found that married men received a higher wage than unmarried women. This result is consistent with DOS (2013) report whereby the mean monthly salary and wage of married male (MYR2253) was higher than unmarried female (MYR1524). According to a study by Ismail, Osman & A. Malek (2013) gender wage differential is highly influenced (80%) by employers' negative perception which resulted in discrimination against women. This, according to them, is contributed by unexplained factors. Clearly, this scenario accounts for government intervention as an effort to impact the enforcement of non-discriminatory human resource practices.

12. Conclusion

Increased women participation in the workforce, especially among the tertiary educated population could accelerate the growth of our country to be a developed nation by 2020. To date, several policies to encourage women participation and retention in the workforce have since been formulated. However, this article argues that these policies are insufficient to attract, develop, and retain women in the workforce. Women in the workforce are still discriminated through sexist human resource practices such as in the recruitment, appraisal, as well as in the benefits and compensation practices. More significantly, this article provides valuable insights that highlight various strategies that can be undertaken by individual female employees, organisation, as well as the government in ensuring an equal treatment particularly for women in the Malaysian workforce.

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