

A Literatural Review on Work Discrimination among Women Employees

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Abstract

The Malaysian government has given a high commitment in their effort in achieving gender equality by providing education parity, equal employment opportunity and implementing anti-discriminatory tools and regulations. Despite these efforts, discrimination against women still persists in the workplace especially at the managerial level. This paper intends to discuss on the nature and forms of discrimination faced by women employees in Malaysia. It also discusses on how the government, employers, and the educational institutions can better enhance their roles in handling and possibly curbing work discrimination and finally, positively enhance their mental health level.

Keywords: discrimination, gender, pay equality, promotion, training, mental health

1. Introduction

The economics of Malaysia has been growing fast over the years and partly contributed by women workers. Women account for about half of the population of Malaysia and have participated in various sectors of employment such as manufacturing, business, service and agriculture, in addition to their traditional role in the unpaid domestic sector of the economy. The percentage of women in the labour force has increased from 44.7 per cent in 2000 to 45.7 per cent in 2005. Their share of total employment increased from 35.6 to 36.7 per cent during the same period. During this period, women were mainly involved in the manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, services as well as the agricultural sector.

In terms of occupational structure, a higher percentage of women were employed in high-paying occupations, mainly due to improvements in their educational attainment. The proportion of women in the category of senior officials and managers increased from 4.8 per cent in 2000 to 5.4 per cent in 2005. In the professional category, women were mainly employed as doctors, dentists, lawyers, architects, and engineers. The percentage in this category was 7.2 in 2000, increasing to 7.5 in 2005 (Malaysia, 2006).

Many studies have indicated that the possibility of Malaysian women participating and succeeding in careers inherently depends on their ability to manage multiple roles as a wife, mother and worker. To put it in more general terms, career success depends on the interplay between work, family factors, organizational demands, women's socio-demographic characteristics and the development climate in the country (Maimunah & Ahmad, 1999; Hughes, 2004; Maimunah & Roziah, 2006).

The Malaysian Gender Gap Index recorded an improvement in gender inequality from 0.34 in 1980 to 0.25 in 2009. However, the improvement has not come equally from all four dimensions of the index: the indexes for education and health registered very low inequality of 0.041 and 0.121, respectively, the index for economic participation moderate inequality of 0.246 and the index for empowerment of women high inequality of 0.578 (Malaysia MDGs Report, 2011).

The report (Malaysia MDGs Report, 2011) further stated that despite increased participation at all levels of education, the participation of women in labour force has not changed much since the 1980s. Women workers have participated in almost all types of occupations. They are part of the fundamental human resources that provide the best of skill and talent, ideas and innovation. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2004) stated that since women make up half of the population, their

engagement, empowerment and contribution helps the country to achieve economic performance effectively. According to the Global Gender Gap Report (2009), the most important determinant of a country's competitiveness is its human talent which includes the skills, education and productivity of its workforce, and women account for one-half of the world's potential talent base.

Empowering women and providing them with equal rights and opportunities for fulfilling their potential is necessary to achieve business and economic progress. Therefore, it is important for the country to provide gender parity of participation and opportunities for women workers in order to fully utilize the skills and talents of these women employees. To achieve the gender parity, gender gaps need to be closed or at least to be reduced.

With the current gender parity in education, goals of gender equality are nearly achievable, and with government commitment, equal employment opportunity for all can become reality. Besides the Malaysian government efforts in promoting gender parity by providing equal education opportunities for all, the government also incorporated the principle of non-discrimination in Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) into the Federal Constitution with the amendment of Article 8(2) to state that no discrimination is to be made on the ground of gender (CEDAW, 2004). The government also established an independent Commission on Human Rights in 1999, which promotes and protects the human rights (CEDAW, 2004), and adopting the Malaysian Gender Budget which underlines its commitment to gender equality (Gender Budgeting in Malaysia, 2005). In addition, in 2006, the Malaysian Government set up the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) Institute of Women's Empowerment (NIEW) which functions includes conducting training on women's empowerment and gender equality to participants from NAM nations (Abdul Aziz, 2008).

Female workers from many parts of the world faced different types of discrimination at their workplaces. It is reported that employment discrimination will not disappear even if men and women possess the same factors such as the education level and experiences (ILO, 2008). Among the discriminatory practices faced by some women workers in Malaysia are reflected in hiring, promotion, job assignment, termination, compensation and the various form of harassment (Bhatt, 2005). Sipe, Johnson and Fisher (2009) stated that genders discrimination happened when employers' decision in selection, evaluation, promotion and reward allocation are made based on the individual's gender.

In the ILO Action Guide (2008), discrimination at work is defined as a difference in work-related opportunity or treatment for which there is no objective or legitimate justification. These gender discriminations negatively affect women's incomes and their opportunities in career developments.

The purpose of this article is to discuss on the nature and forms of discrimination faced by women employees with some reference to Malaysia. Discussion on how the government, employers, and the educational institutions can better enhance their roles in handling and possibly curbing work discrimination and positively enhance their mental health level will also be highlighted.

2. Nature and Forms of Discrimination

Several forms of discrimination will be discussed below:

2.1 Promotion

In Malaysia itself, Koshal et al. (1998) stated that women are under-represented at all management rank due to women being discriminated for promotion to higher ranks despite their continued high performance. Women perceive unequal opportunities for advancement after recruitment. This is perhaps one of the reasons for the lopsided of women at senior level ranks. Norms of executive performance in Malaysia still exist on a "masculine managerial model".

Koshal et al. (1998) stated that women workers have to work harder to get the equal reward as the opposite gender received for the equal work. Ismail and Ibrahim (2007) in their studies found that 49.9 per cent of women employees in Sagamax agreed that women in general have to work harder and longer to prove their credibility in order to achieve the same progress as men. Studies by Ismail and Ibrahim (2007) also revealed that women have been discriminated in the promotion opportunities. Women workers face more resistance for promotion than men due to the perception that male workers are more suitable for managerial positions. The negative attitudes for women who seek higher managerial position in organization were influenced by the existence of a male managerial model. This type of prejudice restricts women's recruitment and promotion to the higher position in the organizations. In the study by Koshal et al. (1998), only 66 per cent of men compared to women, (88 per cent) felt comfortable of having a woman as their boss. This implies that a "male managerial model" still widely accepted in Malaysia and that norm of executive performance are unconsciously based and influenced by this model. Their studies found that more women managers perceived resistance from both male and female

subordinates for their advancement. Female managers received resistance from both male and female for their career advancement. It is also stated that women are perceived by the male managers for not exhibiting interactive leadership style. Women faced a great deal of resistance to be promoted to position of higher ranks even though they are qualified to meet the challenge of the position (Koshal et al., 1998).

Discrimination against women at workplace also existed in other parts of the world. Women were seen as not fit to fill the senior management position due to the high proportion of male managers who views women as a lack of fit in senior management roles (Wood, 2008). Antecol, Barcuss and Clark (2009) discovered in their studies that sex discrimination is one of the main factors which influence workers' job satisfactions and workers' intention to quit. A study by Wood (2008) revealed that in Australia gender stereotyping influenced the attitudes of women toward promotion to higher management ranks. Both men and women employees believed that women will need a longer time to be in the senior management position due to the gender stereotyping attitudes. Hung (1998) revealed a finding where male are significantly over represented in management positions (33.3 percent of the sample) compared to female (15.94 percent). The career advancement of female managers in middle management position in Australia is continuously influenced by gender stereotyping. Although studies showed that some extraordinary women rise to the top, only a few remain. According to Noble and Moore (2006) many women who inspire to leadership positions find it impossible to get there, whereas others who make it eventually leave. Hutchings (2000) indicates that result from her study in Thailand suggest that women are not represented at managerial level in numbers comparable to their membership of the workforce. According to Cai and Kleiner (1999), since management was traditionally viewed as a male occupation, women had great difficulty in moving up the career ladder. This is due to the perception that most women managers are viewed as less likely to possess the attributes characteristics of successful managers than male managers. Study by Orser and Leck (2009) also shows significant discrepancies about the percentage of women in higher level management.

Study by Mun (2010), concluded that in Japan, women are discriminated from male-typed jobs. The male-type jobs provide higher wages, requires longer training and different masculine characteristics. Since women are being discriminated of this job, the wage-gap will increase due to the large training differential. Lower earning for women in the labour market is one of the results of gender discrimination (Besen & Kimmel, 2006). The same scenario happened in Pakistan as Sadaquat and Sheikh (2010) found that employment of women in higher paying jobs is very limited and their advancement is slow compared to men. Most of the women occupy low position and they are suffering from gender discrimination. Burgess (2003) stated in her findings of study in hospitality industry that women are still being pushed into lower status job. This is either caused by lack of opportunities for promotion or attitudes towards their employment. There were still less female in the senior management level.

From the mentioned studies above, women were being under-represented in the higher ranks of the organizations. It is perceived that a worker needs certain masculine traits to be in the managerial ranks. The perception of women of being ineffective as managers because of not having the masculine traits led to fewer women in the higher managerial levels. Mihail (2006) found in his study that gender stereotyping still persists in the Greek culture and therefore also exist in the Greece workplace. In the study, gender was found to be the most influential factors in forming the attitude towards women as managers. Organizational cultures often reflects continuing gender stereotypes and studies also shows that the perception of "women take care and men take charge" is a prevailing stereotype of the difference between men and women, and that women are not as good as men at problem solving (Bible & Hill, 2007). As stated by Wood (2008), senior management and leadership positions continued to be perceived as a male domain and it will continue to exert a negative influence on the career advancement of women.

This is in line with Brink and Stobbe (2009), which in their studies found that women students are seen incompetent to pursue a career in earth sciences, due to the perception that they are not physically strong enough to do the hard work of an earth scientist.

2.2 Pay Equality

The fewer number of women involvement in the higher position contribute to the gender earnings gap. Women tend to be concentrated on lower ranking positions that are lower paid (Fernandez, 2009). From the study, it also suggested that not only wage discrimination exist in all occupations, discrimination in wage is more in male dominated occupation. Equality in education in men and women appear not to be a sufficient condition for pay equality. This is evidence in Kuwait, when findings from study of Hosni and Al-Qudsi (1988) indicate that even with higher educational attainment, women are still earning less than men. This pay differential is due to wage

discriminatory practices.

In Turkey, gender discrimination existed in the form of gender wage gaps. Kara (2006) stated that discrimination against women is 30 per cent and that women are paid less than men in all occupations. In Turkey discrimination happened more in the private sectors than in the public sectors. Study by Ismail and Ibrahim (2007) also revealed that 78.7 per cent of the women workers perceived that they are not being paid as well as their counterparts for the same job and that they are being subjected to gender-related discriminations. Orser and Leck (2009) also provide evidence of earnings disparities between genders when their findings show a gender compensation gap among senior management. Burgess (2003) explained that data collected in her survey shows evidence of differences between male and female earnings. In the United States, gender pay gap is decelerated in the 1990s and expected to continue declining in the next few years. However, it is very unlikely to vanish. The gender pay gap is surely tied to the effect of discrimination against women (Blau & Kahn, 2000). In another study by Broyles (2009), it is discovered that nearly 20 percent of the earnings gaps for female chemists is due to employer discrimination and they are earning over \$3,000 less income per year.

According to the ILO (2008), gender discrimination will still exist despite the increase in education level and experience of women at work. This is supported by Tam (1996), where his study revealed that employers' gender discrimination contributed to the gender income gap. Gender discrimination could affect the behaviour of the woman workers which in turn negatively affects their productivity level, thus reducing their earnings. In term of education level, even though relatively more women are educated, they still face gender inequality such as earnings gaps. Only by increasing numbers of women enrolling in education is not enough to eradicate gender inequality (Durbin & Fleetwood, 2010).

2.3 Training Opportunities

Study by Hutchings (2000) indicates that discrimination against women workers exist in Thailand when majority of the organization resist to incur time and costs associated with introducing policies which could help to reduce gender inequality. Absence of specific training programmes, organization policy, and under-representation at managerial levels indicates the existence of discrimination against women in Thailand. In their studies which used a large sample of medical professionals, Carr, et al. (2003) found that 75 per cent of the female respondents chose gender discrimination as one of the most important factors that hindered their careers. The study revealed that these respondents were inadequately prepared as a result of their formal and informal training to deal with gender discrimination at workplace.

3. Ways to Handle Work Discrimination

Zaiton (2011) in her research revealed that there is a need for women workers to understand the existence of discrimination against them in the workplace. They need to understand their equal rights as employees and there are ways to avoid discrimination. It would be beneficial to educate and prepared them on the discrimination issues before they enter the workforce. Introduction of the issues can begin as early as in the primary and secondary school levels. It could be done by eliminating all kinds of sexism and stereotyping of the women's roles from the textbooks, references and any materials used in the teaching and learning processes.

Then, the effort can be continued in the college and university levels. The education of gender discrimination and other discriminatory employment practices should be covered in relevant courses such as Human Resource Management and Business Law. Students should be exposed to forms and nature of discriminations, ways to avoid discrimination and how to handle discrimination to increase their knowledge and understanding over the issue. The effect of gender discrimination such as less opportunity for promotion and pay inequality may be minimized if these future workers are better prepared on the discrimination problems. The negative impacts of discrimination on self-confidence, job satisfaction, and career commitment may also be reduced if they are better prepared with the knowledge.

In addition, employers should continuously make effort to address and reduce gender discrimination through policies, training and enforcement (Sipe et al., 2009; Cai & Kleiner, 1999). Employers may encourage the employees, especially the woman employees to file complaints or reports of any discriminatory practices against them. The employees should be ensured that if they make the report, they are not going to be perceived as a troublemaker or a complainer which in turn, may be burdened with undeserved performance rating or increased workload (Leslie & Gelfand, 2008). Employers should be aware that internal discrimination claims are much less costly than the external claims, such as legal claims. External claims are highly costly in term of both time and money. By encouraging internal discrimination claims, organizations are able to retain talented employees and reduce the possibility of external claims against the organization by those who perceive discrimination (Cai & Kleiner, 1999).

In addition, organization may provide their managers, decision makers and policy makers with training programs, seminars or workshops on discrimination at workplace. Providing them with the knowledge and trainings will allow them to increase their understanding, awareness and ability to avoid discriminatory practices. With this it is able to increase the organization's ability to prevent valuable employees from leaving the organization or filing legal claims of discrimination.

Finally, the government, specifically the Human Resource Ministry could increase and continue to implement anti-discriminatory tools and regulations to reduce the gender gaps. The Courts and government of Malaysia need to give commitment in implementing comprehensive laws with effective remedies if violated. The government needs to promulgate legislation with clear gender equality objective which applicable in all circumstances. Among the main concerns are the definition and understanding of gender equality, definition of direct discrimination and indirect discrimination. The legislation must also be construed in accordance with the provisions of CEDAW (Abdul Aziz, 2008).

Zaiton (2011) further states that women workers experience of discrimination in the workplace is surprising and differs than what was expected in which the higher percentage of negative responses recorded from the respondents, even though majority of the previous research indicates that there are existences of discriminations against women in the workplace. According to previous researches, discrimination against women normally happened more in the higher position or decision making level and fewer discrimination practice in the lower level management.

This result may also be due to the higher level of education parity that Malaysian women received. As Huang (1998) explained in his article that the gap between the male and female workers can be narrowed effectively by women pursuing higher level of education. Women in Malaysia surpassed men in enrolment and academic achievements in many situations and they seem to be closing the gap with men in the socio-economic arena (Nadchatram, 2005). Women in Malaysia have made encouraging progress in many key areas such as education, employment and thus increased participation in power sharing and the decision-making process. Even though inequality still persists in Malaysia, due to the increase in education level, the gap can be narrowed (Malaysia, 2003).

The other factor that may lead to the lower level of discrimination is the government efforts in curbing the discriminatory practices in the workplace. The government, especially the Human Resources Ministry and the Ministry of Women and Family Development have developed and implemented many tools and program of anti-discrimination that help to control and reduce the discrimination practices against women workers. Anti-discriminatory laws, procedures and policies were also developed to provide guidelines and helps in handling claims of discrimination against women.

4. Conclusion

Despite efforts by the government to increase gender equality in Malaysia, gender discrimination against women still persist in the Malaysian workplace. Discrimination against women at workplace existed in almost every country in the world. Studies have shown that discrimination practices such as gender pay gaps, sexual harassment, occupational gender segregation, discrimination in hiring and promoting and stereotyping happened worldwide. The government of Malaysia has made several commitments to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. A National Policy on Women has been adopted in 1989. In 2001, it amended Article 8(2) of the Constitution to prohibit any form of gender discrimination, and in August 2009, it launched the second National Policy on Women and the Women's Development Action Plan (Malaysia MDGs Report, 2011). The Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) stated a policy objective of increasing the number of women in key decision-making positions. This is in line with the CEDAW Committee's recommendation to establish concrete goals and timetables to accelerate the increase in the representation of women in elected and appointed bodies in all areas of public life. Women hold almost two thirds of public service positions and many women occupy middle-management positions.

Even though there is evidence that discrimination exists more in the upper level management position and less in the lower level jobs, the discrimination practices still have to be monitored consistently and continuously by the relevant parties. Alternatives to handle discrimination discussed above may help to further reduce and minimize the discrimination practices against women workers. Efforts taken to improve the situation and to reduce the discrimination practices need to be intensified and done continuously. This will ensure that women workers will continue to enjoy their equal rights and employment benefits which will in turn reduce the stress level, enhance their level of mental health, increase their job satisfaction as well as their contribution to social and economic well-being.

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