QUALITY CIRCLES IN MALAYSIA: GENDER PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines gender attitudes towards employee involvement scheme. Employee involvement (EI) has been the focus of considerable research on the management of people in organizations, particularly on whether EI results in improved employee attitudes and behaviours, and, in turn, company performance. Although EI trends have continued to interest academics and practitioners and are well documented in the literature, the literature is relatively silent on studying EI schemes in relation to gender. This paper intends to reconcile this gap by examining differences between the attitudes of men and women towards EI programmes. A second feature of this research is its focus on a non-western context. Quality Circles (QC) and Employee Share Ownership Schemes (ESOS) were the focus of the current study of EI. The general aim was to understand the relationship between EI and employees' organizational commitment and the effects of gender, degree of participation, and management support within a Malaysian context. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in a mixed methods study. The research found that there were no significant differences in the attitudes of men and women toward EI schemes; nor were there any gender differences in wider work-related attitudes including organizational commitment, job satisfaction and attitudes towards management. There are lessons for the management to learn.

Keywords: employee involvement, quality circles, employee share ownership schemes, organizational commitment, gender.

1.   Introduction

Interest in employee involvement (EI) or participation by academics and practitioners has seen the emergence of a rapidly growing body of literature. Due to fierce competitive environment is forcing many organizations to implement programmes that aim to improve their operations and quality so they can serve their customers better than their competitors [Shelton, 1991]. Among the major elements of this change has been the extension of EI or participation in the workplace. These trends have been well documented but the literature is largely silent when it comes to considering employees' experiences at different levels of EI and in particular when considering gender issues.

The purpose of this paper was to address some of the critical needs expressed by those who have synthesised prior EI research. It attempted to tap the attitudes of employees, both participants and non-participants, and above all, included gender as the main variable. In this paper, it is argued that the research in EI continues to operate as gender blind. The researcher tries to avoid this common error by including gender as one of the key independent variables in examining the relationship between EI and organizational commitment.

2.   Employee Involvement In Context

EI may refer to involvement in the task design, as in quality circles (QCs) or some teamwork; gaining of power in decision making, for example, through empowerment efforts or joint consultation; and financial participation, such as ESOSs or gain sharing [Harley et al., 2005].

The degree to which the employees wish to participate in the organization is argued to be influenced by their cultural orientation. Hofstede [1983] pointed out that power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism are linked to participative management. Cultures with low power distance tend to encourage participation. Malaysian positions on Hofstede cultural maps, especially on the Power Distance from those of the United States, Great Britain and most western countries, and show that Malaysia is "Large Power Distance - Low Individualism" whereas most western countries are in the opposite side of the quadrant. This seems to have some reference points in the above Malaysian studies. Therefore, attitudes towards employee involvement schemes in Malaysia are likely to be different from those in western countries, where such schemes were conceived and implemented, and most research has been carried out.

The results from different styles of leadership studied by Savery [1994], that is consultative, autocratic and democratic, show that people under a democratic style of management had the highest level of commitment with the lowest level of commitment indicated by the autocratic group. This suggested that an increase in the level of perceived involvement in the decision making process increases the feeling of commitment towards the organization held by an individual [Savery, 1994].

3.   Forms of EI – Quality Circles (QC)

QCs are one of many forms of team-based EI initiatives, such as team briefings, suggestion schemes, and profit sharing, adopted in organizations since the 1970s [Marchington et al., 1992]. QCs require the active participation of line managers with skills in consultative and collaborative styles of management and their long-term survival depends on managers devoting some of their time to QC activities. Further, as Marchington et al. [1992] have found, there is a further problem that employee relations decisions tend to be downstream from other business issues [Purcell et al., 1987]. Senior management's approach to QCs has not involved long-term planning and has been said to be faddish [Ramsay, 1991], which makes a "collaborative" style of management hard to sustain by definition [Banas, 1988]. As a form of EI it has become harder to justify their continuation when evaluated with more recent and popular EI and quality management practices.

The circles are often given some latitude in the determination of the issues to be covered in the decision-making process. Members are expected to receive training in problem-solving and group dynamics. The scheme is seen as a formalized avenue for eliciting and managing participation in relevant operational areas. The rationale for decision-making groups such as quality circles is based on the notion that those who are intimately involved in performing an activity are in the best position to address problems in that area. The group method of problem-solving and the participative management philosophy associated with it are natural outgrowths of managerial practices developed by the Japanese [Huse and Cummings, 1985].

The theoretical framework for analysing the impact of quality circles is the participation in decision-making literature. QCs are seen as a formalised way for eliciting and managing employee participation in relevant operational areas [Marks et al., 1986; Munchus, 1983]. Participation in QCs is viewed as method for enhancing employee attitudes and behaviours.

For example, participation in QCs has commonly been studied in conjunction with satisfaction and organizational commitment.

4.   Gender And Commitment

The organizational hierarchy is based on the presumption that lower-level positions carry a lower level of complexity and responsibility. These positions often are filled predominantly by women. Male workers with presumably undivided commitment to paid employment are considered more suited to positions of authority. Some even argue that women's inferior labour status is not a problem to be solved, but rather something women choose freely in their efforts to adapt paid work to household responsibilities [Bergmann, 1989; Hakim, 1996]. However, job complexity and responsibility are defined in terms of managerial tasks from which women are excluded (Acker, 1990).

Some researchers [Angle and Perry, 1981; Hrebiniak and Alutto, 1972] have found that women are more committed. However, other researchers [Morris and Steers, 1980] did not find women were more committed, suggesting that differences may exist between organizations and between occupations. Angle and Perry [1981] suggest that their result was unexpected because the organizational commitment questionnaire taps a form of commitment which is conceptually close to work involvement and earlier research suggests that women are less involved in their work than men.

Because of "perceived" domestic commitments and responsibilities, women are often assumed to be less mobile, less committed to the organization and more inclined to be absent from work than men, despite contradictory research evidence. Consequently, women tend to be overlooked in the promotion stakes, are more likely to be regarded as "non-progressional" and receive fewer training opportunities than their male colleagues [Elias and Main, 1982].

5.   Construction of Gender

Hare–Mustin and Marecek [1989] suggest that rather than attempt to determine which representation of gender is correct, theories of gender should be evaluated in a constructive framework. "Theories of gender, like other scientific theories, are representations of reality organized by particular assumptive frameworks and reflecting certain interests" [Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1989 ,p.456]. In the constructive framework, theories of gender, which are constructed as theories of difference, can be categorised by one of two competing bias - alpha bias and beta bias.

Alpha bias sees differences in men and women. As an example, it provides a rationalisation for excluding women from certain occupations or restricting women to lower-status positions within an occupation. The separation of public-masculine/domestic-feminine into a "natural" dichotomy comes from biological differences that are said to affect orientations towards women's and men's role in society [Gutek et al., 1981]. The research of Crowford and Marecek [1989] emphasises gender differences that characterised woman as "problem or anomaly". Men's behaviours are set as the norm against which women are evaluated, and if differences are observed, they usually are interpreted as a female deficiency. Women are then pressed to change their behaviour to conform to a masculine stereotype.

In alpha bias, even if women are given the opportunity to participate, women may continue to struggle for participation in EI. This is because then they might be trying to

compete against the forces that highlight and rationalise the differences between men and women.

Beta bias assumes differences but ignores the differences or minimises them, as in an organization already gendered as masculine. According to Mustin and Marecek [1988], beta bias occurs any time that generalisations about human behaviour are made based on observations that are restricted to males. Beta bias underlies the traditional representation of the organization as gender neutral. Acker [1990] observes:

> *To say that an organization or any other analytic unit is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. Gender is not additional to ongoing processes, or conceived as gender neutral. Rather it is an integral part of those processes…*(p.146)

Acker argues that to talk abstractly about "the worker" or "the job" actually invokes a traditional masculine image. And Welsh [1992] added, the concept of a job assumes distinct boundaries between job and domestic life. The ideal worker is one whose central life interest is work and who has few "outside" demands affecting job commitment. That ideal worker has been construed as male, given traditionally gendered divisions of responsibility for home and family. To ignore a masculine orientation in the organizational structure is a form of beta bias.

Beta organizations are gendered and so bias will prevail in such organizations. One may assume that women may find themselves ignored in term of EI because there will be less chance to prove themselves; that is, they may take bias for granted and accept the masculinity of the organization. This is because people take for granted the masculinity of beta bias in the workplace. Thus, women may not find opportunities for EI.

Therefore, its important to study EI with respect to gender so as to see what prevents women from participating in EI and what could be done to eliminate the "taken for granted" bias in the case of beta bias and the rationalised version in the case of alpha bias.

6.   Methodology

In order to examine the relationship between EI schemes and employee attitudes, as well as the effects of gender, mixed methods were used. These comprised a questionnaire-based survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The survey was for the purpose of addressing Objective One, to investigate the relationship between employee attitudes to EI and organizational commitment. Qualitative information from interviews with managers and focus groups with non-management employees addressed Objective Two, where the aim was to explore the reasons for gender differences or similarities in the workplace.

The research sample for the questionnaire consisted of all levels of employees from the three utility companies in Malaysia. There were 31 questions, typically based on a five-item Likert scale (with opportunities for open comment), covering employee involvement and organizational commitment related issues; quality circles, employee share ownership schemes, views of the organization; orientation to work and attitudes towards women at work.

In each organization, the semi-structured interviews with managers included the Chief Executive Officer, the Director of Human Resources and other HR personnel together with senior operations managers. From this, and with the support of company executives, the researcher conducted interviews with personnel in the head quarters as well as the branches of the Northern and Southern states of Malaysia.

The semi-structured interview comprised key themes to be explored with each respondent. For managers and those responsible for introducing and managing the employee involvement initiatives, the questioning explored the background, intentions for the initiatives and perceived benefits, change in the way the organization was to be managed, perceived problems regarding the implementation of employee involvement schemes and views as to what contribution employee involvement would made to the organization. Having established the managerial intentions for employee involvement, interviewees were asked to describe their own attitudes toward the schemes, how they perceived non-managers' attitudes towards the schemes, and differences between women and men on this issue.

As for focus groups with the non-managerial employees, in addressing Objective Two, the key themes explored were gender issues, their experiences with the schemes, their perceptions regarding intentions for the initiatives, perceived benefits, perceived problems regarding implementation, and perceived managers' attitudes towards the schemes.

A total of 271 responses across the three companies were received from the survey, and 9 focus groups and 37 individual interviews were carried out. Altogether, 90 per cent of respondents were Malays, which represented well the population of public utility companies in Malaysia.

6.1   *Hypotheses*

The general research aim of the thesis is to understand the relationship between EI and organizational commitment and the effects of gender, degree of participation, and management support within a Malaysian context. Two research objectives were identified:

> **Objective One**: To investigate whether there is a relationship between employee attitudes towards employee involvement and employee commitment.
> **Objective Two**: To explore the effect of gender in a Malaysian context on employee attitudes to EI.

Objective One was addressed through quantitative analysis, and hence a hypotheses testing approach, whereas the second objective, was addressed using the qualitative methods of interview and focus groups. Four hypotheses were derived to examine Objective One:

> H1. Amongst EI participants (quality circles), there is a positive relationship between favourable attitudes towards EI and organizational commitment.
> H2. Amongst EI non-participants (quality circles),
> (a) attitudes towards EI will be less favourable than those of participants
> (b) there will still be a positive relationship between these attitudes and organizational commitment.

7.   Results and Discussion

Significant gender differences were found only in non-participants' attitudes towards quality circle schemes where women non-participants tended to be more positive than male non-participants. In summary, the hypothesis tests also showed a significant difference between non-participants and participants in their attitudes towards quality circles, with the latter tending to be more positive. With regard to superiors' support for quality circles, the result was consistent with other common findings that quality circles fail due to a lack of management support. Moreover, management support seems to act as an important moderator

of the relationship between attitudes toward EI and organizational commitment in the case of non-participants. In this research, there was no significant relationship between attitudes towards EI and organizational commitment for participants of quality circles who perceived their superior's support, but there was a significant relationship for non-participants. It indicates that leaders play an important role for non-members.

For Objective Two which explored the reasons for gender differences in the workplace by examining the qualitative data gathered from management interviews and employee focus groups. The reasons for gender differences or similarities which emerged focused around orientations to work, perceptions of women at work, and perceptions of women managers. Findings from the focus groups also showed that in organizational cultures where managers do not readily participate managers refuse to let go of old autocratic styles of leadership.

7.1   *Quality Circles and Organizational Commitment*

The research found that, for participants, attitudes towards quality circles and organizational commitment among participants were related. This result is in line with the focus group findings, where participants suggested their involvement in decision making regarding their work is an important determinant for maintaining a sense of commitment to the organization. When the organization provides them with such a vehicle, the probability of developing such commitment is enhanced.

For non-participants at the lower levels of the workforce, also, attitudes towards quality circles and organizational commitment were related. even though non-participants, in general, tended to have less favourable attitudes towards the QC schemes. Both sets of positive attitudes were, unsurprisingly, related, even for the generally less positive staff with respect to QCs. The findings showed, moreover, that there were more positive attitudes among female non-participants as compared to male participants. To explain this phenomenon, we may take into account the different positions of men and women in the organization, with the men being mostly technicians and the women mostly clerks. From the focus group findings, non-participation among women was attributed to the fact that they were not being recognized and being asked to 'compete' with the male technicians in order to 'win' a quality circle project. The majority also highlighted the absence of a non-participative climate surrounding the work area. What most concerned them was the authoritarian management style, which at the lower end positions put them at a further disadvantage. Their argument was that with such an environment they found it hard to believe that involvement practices can be fully implemented.

Nevertheless, if they are being treated as equal, it may for instance even be that women express a stronger demand for influence than men, given their circumstances. This could explain the finding of a significant difference between genders, where non-participant women workers have more favourable attitudes towards the scheme than non-participant men. Another possibility is that, despite their position low down in the hierarchy and not being given a chance to participate, women's attitudes are better than men's. Women, or at least those in powerless jobs, may be more readily impressed by management initiated EI initiatives, as has been noted by Allen et al. [1991] who found that in the late 1970s/early 1980s at least, women were if anything more supportive of the worker-director idea.

Findings from the interviews, suggested that even women at managerial levels claim that QCs are seen as a platform for them to get recognition. This points to one thing - that women in any position felt a disadvantage, even though it was more so at lower levels. They saw QCs as a chance to enhance their ability to compete with their male colleagues. Hence,

participating in quality circles was presumed to be an advantage for being recognized by the management. As for men at middle management, especially the district managers, they commented that their main constraint on participation was more time and work pressures. Most of them commented that top management did send directives for them to participate, but nevertheless top management did not fully support them in realizing their workload. As an example, when running QCs they felt that they were overburdened with extra workload but with no extra rewards.

The root cause of the problem is that top management or management in general put emphasis on the wrong focus - 'winning' quality circle projects. While presentation of the completed quality circle projects is part of the process, it is just part of the many other processes which need to be focused on. As an example, the processes of identifying a problem, of problem solving, of analyzing data, of brainstorming, of working as a team, and above all training are a crucial part and parcel of a quality circle. Workers at the lower level can never gain their confidence in quality circle success if not exposed to the proper training. This is where the majority of the non-participating women felt they were located.

From the interviews and focus groups findings, it was apparent that there was a 'culture' in these Malaysian public organizations that membership of QCs was perceived as primarily an exercise in being nominated for participating at the national conventions. Unfortunately, this attitude was shared by QC participants as well as the majority of the employees. The negative impact of this was felt mainly by the women at lower levels in the organization, who were further disadvantaged when 'competition' for projects was against the generally male technicians.

The holistic approach to quality circles concerned with getting employees involved in their daily work activities may indeed have a positive impact on employee satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational efficiency. The quality of work life is also expected to be enhanced as a result of employees being given an opportunity to participate in problem solving and decision making [Hutchins, 1985; Yager, 1980]. Women workers should be able to demonstrate the benefits of QCs in achieving worker involvement in problem solving, which eventually can lead to personal development and greater recognition. This will only happen, however, according to Robson [1984], if companies can think fully through the meaning and implication of developing an open participative management culture, as would be expected in a well implemented quality circle.

8.   Conclusions

The findings of the survey confirmed this relationship for non-participants but not for participants. The attitudes towards quality circle are not related to organizational commitment for participants who perceived their supervisors have favourable attitudes towards the quality circle scheme. The attitudes towards the quality circle scheme and organizational commitment were related among non-participants who perceived that there is superiors' support towards the scheme. This finding emphasizes the importance of top management support especially for non-participants observing the scheme. Qualitative findings also showed that this was especially so for women, and for workers who through pressures of time and work, found it difficult to participate in the EI schemes. With regard to attitudes towards women and work, the study also found less favourable attitudes amongst men. There was no significant difference, however, in men's and women's attitudes towards organizational commitment.

The importance of management trust before implementing any new programme was evident from the present findings. More so, as found in this research, management culture in

these organizations is still very much of an autocratic style, where a top down management style is extensively practiced. Specifically, this suggests that management must prepare before implementing any imported programmes.

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