

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CAREER ADVANCEMENT: A PRELIMINARY STUDY IN R&D ORGANIZATION IN MALAYSIA

NORSIAH AMINUDIN & NUR ATIQAH ABDULLAH

ABSTRACT

This paper is a report on a study conducted as part of a larger study on gender in Malaysian R&D firms. It was carried out to examine career advancement in an R&D organization of a Malaysian multinational firm. It was designed to gather the opinions of both top-level and middle-level managers to ascertain whether there is any difference between male and female managers in terms of their perception in their career advancement opportunities. This study focuses on R&D particularly because such an organization is perceived to be challenging and male-dominated. Using a single case study methodology. A series of interview were conducted with both male and female researchers. This paper only reports the preliminary result of above study. An interview with one top-level manager reveals that in term of numbers, men do not dominated the R&D organization. 40% of the researchers in this organization are female. This finding contradicts the traditional belief that women have fewer prospects to join an R&D firm. Additionally, the gender difference pertaining to career advancement was not reported by the interviewees in this study.

Keywords: gender; career advancement; R&D; organization.

1. Introduction

A considerable amount of research has focused on the career progress of women in organizations, (e.g.) Wood & Lindorff (2000). It has been claimed that attitudinal, behavioural and structural barriers that hinder career advancement for many women existed (Adler & Izraeli, 1988), and persist today (Still, 1997). Although women are graduating in higher numbers than men from educational institutions since 1990s (Fagenson & Jackson, 1994) and more women are entering the paid workforce (Hind & Baruch, 1997) and taking up managerial roles (Parker & Fagenson, 1994), the poor representation of women at senior management level continues. For example, in the USA women fill less than 5 percent of top management positions (Aguinis & Adams, 1998), in the UK the figure is estimated to be less than 4 percent (Davidson, 1996) and in Australia the figure is approximately 3 percent (Uren, 1999). It appears that sex differences exist in promotions to senior management, and this occurrence is noted worldwide.

Surveys of women in management positions in the USA have indicated a notion of masculine managerial model of "organization man" (Dorbrzynski, 1996; Guy, 1992; Rosener, 1995). Against this standard, women are perceived to be inadequate as managers. The existence of a male managerial model creates negative attitudes for women seeking positions or advancement in management careers in organizations. Prejudices about women restrict their recruitment and promotion to the positions of power in organizations. In male-dominated fields, there exists a doubt if women can ever accomplish the job as well as a man. Employers also doubt if women can work successfully with men as their co-workers (Khoshal, et. al, 1998).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Women Participation in Malaysian Economy

Malaysia's decision to adopt export-oriented industrialization (EOI) brought sustained growth throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. During those years the economy grew at an average rate of 8.5 percent. Women's participation in the labour force as a consequence of EOI increased from 37 percent in 1970 to 43.5 percent in 1995 (Balakrisnan, 2006). Malaysian women are about one third of the labour force and by occupation, women are spread across the choices except with noticeably few in administration and management, and a higher number in production as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Women as percent of labourers in each occupation

Types of Occupation	1995	2000
Production	25.4	22.6
Clerical	17.5	17.5
Agriculture	16.6	14.8
Service	14.4	17.4
Professional and Technical	12.7	13.5
Sales	11.6	12.1
Administrative and Managerial	1.8	2.2

Source: Eighth Malaysia Plan

A study conducted by Yahya (1991) also showed that the increased female participation in the workforce has been lopsided when analysed from the types of jobs they are employed to do. The majority of new female occupations were clustered in the lower and middle income category jobs such as clerical staff, service and production workers, equipment operators and labourers. Apparently, employers view women as not having the right qualifications or skills to hold top managerial positions, and their background may not be according to the organizational interests. Women are also discriminated against in training opportunities and skill enhancement for upper management level positions (Ahmad, 1998; Nor, 2000; Hartog, 1986).

According to Nor (2005), the largest growth in women's participation has been in the middle and low-level jobs, with majority of them is concentrated in the unskilled/semi-skilled categories and recruited as a low wage labour force. Malaysian women are also more likely to be found as clerical and service workers than men. At administrative and managerial level, representation of women is estimated to be less than 2 percent (Ahmad, 1998). In the public sector, only 18 percent of the top management positions are held by women, even though women outnumber men in the professional and management service group. The statistics are even worse in the private sector. Only 75 women (11 percent) compared to 609 men sit on the board of directors of government-linked companies. In the private corporate sector, women board members comprise only 10.2 percent, while only 13.9 percent of top management positions from general managers and above are held by women (New Straits Times, 17 November 2006).

2.2 Career Advancement of Women

Ahmad (1998) stated that current discriminatory practices at the workplace constitute one possible explanation for women not being recruited in managing and decision-making positions. The major source of employer discrimination is the favorable treatment of males rather than the unfavorable treatment of females in the labour market. She further stated that women with identical attributes with men, in terms of qualifications and experience, are subject to discriminatory practices barring women from promotion within a particular occupational structure. The so-called 'glass ceiling', a barrier that was formed due to biased work condition, works against women's professional advancement (Nor, 1998; Nor, 2000).

Women perceived to be 'not emotionally equipped' for management has been an obstacle for women seeking career advancement, which consequently affect their earnings. Certain traits which are often associated with a successful manager are still masculine in orientation, and hence management was almost exclusively a male domain. In the glass ceiling study, women has difficulty in getting constructive performance feedback and lack opportunity for development. Many women are not adequately evaluated in their job performance which adversely affects their professional growth and earnings (Jackson, 1999).

McCall et al. (1988) and Horgan (1989) suggest that certain types of job assignments and challenging experiences are less available to women. For example, women may be offered staff, not line jobs that are not high profile or challenging. Some of these suggestions were supported by Ohlott et al. (1994) when they looked at the demands of managerial jobs and factors which may complicated learning from the job. They found that women experienced very different demands from managerial jobs and they had to work harder to prove themselves, but women were also learning about managerial work from a greater variety of sources than were men. Horgan (1989) also suggests that what is learned from a given set of developmental experiences may differ between men and women.

Although some sources of challenge are common to all managers (high stakes, adverse business conditions, dealing with staff members) women may experience additional challenges such as prejudice, isolation or conflict between career and personal life, and may also face higher performance standards, more adverse conditions (resentment and hostility of male staff), more scrutiny and more "second-shift" work (Hochschild, 1989). Despite these things, limiting challenge for the career advancement of women, since giving women less important jobs and not considering them for key assignments blocks their advancement by denying them important business experiences (Burke et al., 2006). Similarly, according to Ahmad (1998), female labour participation also seems to be related to the attitude of the family towards women. A study of selected successful career women in Malaysia, for example, revealed that changing attitudes of parents and husbands towards a more positive trend were perceived to be related to higher educational attainment of women (Fatimah, 1993), which in turn could influence women's participation in the labour force. The importance of the attitudinal factor is further substantiated by a study of rural women's economic participation, which found that women whose husbands have less traditional orientation towards gender roles were less burdened with domestic work (Ahmad & Ismail, 1992).

2.3 R&D Organization and Workforce in Malaysia

The result of the research and development (R&D) surveys since 1992, allow a detailed trend analysis on Malaysian Performance of research and development in three major sectors namely, Government Research Institutes (GRIs), private sector and Institutes of Higher

Learning (IHLs). However, analysis on the trend of R&D in Non-profit Organization (NPOs) sector could not be done due to the poor response received from the NPOs and therefore such data are not analysed (MASTIC, 1996). The R&D workforce is characterized by researchers, technicians and other support staff. The workforce is further divided into two categories i.e. full-time equivalent (FTE) and headcount (MASTIC, 1996).

A review of literature found that there is a lack of research in gender in Malaysia. Therefore, up to this point the assumption of whether the existing gender models are applicable to practices in R&D organizations in Malaysia need to be examined. For example, existing literature in the West argues that technical functions including R&D are dominated by men. There is a need to ascertain whether this is also true in organizations in Malaysia. Existing gender studies also suggest that career advancements of women could be limited by the 'gender culture', which argues about the 'proper place' for women. This argument supports that the gendered hierarchy is the most significant barrier to women's career advancements in organizations. However, whether 'gender culture' also exists in R&D organizations in Malaysia have yet to be explored.

R&D is a high priority on the governments' agenda, as it is seen as a key driver for economic growth and as a way to increase productivity (Bloom & Griffith, 2001). Many authors have highlighted the potential financial and social gains to be had from R&D investment (Porter, 1990; Griffith, 2000; Hall, 1991; Griliches, 1992; Cameron, 2000; DTI, 2005; Rodgers, 2006). Research, development and engineering (RD&E) activities are recognized as a means of creating and sustaining competitive advantage in the global marketplace (Petroni, 2000). As organizations becomes more dependent on technology, the importance of having competent RD&E professionals and of the effective utilization or management of RD&E professionals in the organization increases. An important element of effective management of RD&E professionals is the design of a career-management system, to satisfy employees' career values and aspirations and to make sure the organization has the right mix of people, with the right mix of skills, at the appropriate organizational level (Greenhaus & Callanan, 1994).

3. Methodology

A study was carried out to examine career advancement in an R&D organization of a Malaysian multinational firm. Using a single case study methodology, this study gathers the opinions of both top-level and middle-level managers to ascertain whether there is any difference between male and female managers in terms of their perception in their career advancement opportunities. This study focuses on R&D particularly because such an organization is perceived to be challenging and male-dominated. A series of interview were conducted with both male and female researchers. This paper only reports the preliminary result of above study.

4. Results

The study found that R&D organization operates with a matrix structure. The researchers report to the technical group as well as to the project manager. The R&D organization is divided into three major units: Marketing Unit, Technical Unit and Project Management Unit. The marketing unit source out new businesses while the technical group, which comprised all the researchers, is divided into several subunits. The primary purpose of housing technical staff members into subunits is to develop their technical capability. The third unit, which is the project management unit, manages projects. When a project is secured, a project team,

whose members are drawn from any of the technical groups, is formed. A project leader was appointed and for the duration of the project, the team members report to the project management unit.

Interview with one top-level managers reveals that in term of numbers, men do not dominated the R&D organization. 40% of the researchers in this organization are female. This finding contradicts the traditional belief that women have fewer number of prospects to join an R&D firm. Nevertheless, the interviews revealed that men dominated jobs which are perceived to be challenging. Additionally, the gender difference pertaining to career advancement was not reported by the interviewees in this study. Female researchers do not face the 'traditional' barriers of career advancements. The manager stressed that the researchers are assessed 'equally' using the same measurement system. In fact, women researchers filled some of the top-level position in this organization. The manager explained that there are two types of career advancements: technical ladder or administrative ladder. This study need to explore the actual percentage that made up women in this type of advancement structure.

However, it is important to note that there are some constraints for women doing offshore work because certain smaller platforms cannot accommodate women. This should create a gap when offshore work is concern. These findings contradict the common assumption that there exist barriers to women's career advancement. Nevertheless, these findings need further validation. For that purpose, more interviews need to be conducted in this organization to solicit opinions especially from the women researchers themselves.

5. Suggestions for Future Research

Studies of other R&D organizations should also be conducted to further examine this issue. Another interesting question to ask is what is the impact of gender on the types of jobs performed by women? Are women do routinely, deskilling, or structured jobs or otherwise argue that rationalization and automation go hand in hand with feminization in the sector.

Second, to what extent women experience empowerment in their work. For example, whether high percentages of men are on top-level compared to women, whether men have high chances to be promoted over women, and consequently whether women received less recognition compared to men.

6. Conclusions

The findings of the present study highlight the need for addressing gender issues in future management research. As demonstrated in the study, women participated as equally as men in career development in R&D organization. Nevertheless, men are still seems to dominate jobs that are perceived to be challenging.

Literature shows the frequent occurrence of stereotyping (Degler, 1980; Dex, 1985) showing that women are indeed thought of as different and women themselves feel they are being treated as secondary employees at work. To avoid women feeling this way, women must be given a chance to prove themselves in so called "masculine jobs". Davidson (1987) and Lewis and Cooper (1989) suggest appropriate models and mentors for this situation. They also suggest that a degree of support both at home and work is essential for women's advancement in the workplace.

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