

A Study on Barriers to Women's Career Advancement in Private Sector Companies in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

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The research was motivated by the desire to ascertain the progress Malaysia has made in achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals in ensuring equal rights for women. This includes ensuring women have equal opportunity to gain top management positions in organizations. The purpose of this research is to identify the barriers in women's career advancement in private sector companies in Malaysia and the path by which gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational cultures, and glass ceiling affect women's career advancement. A total of 130 women employees from various private sector companies constitutes the sample. This research disclosed that gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational cultures, and glass ceiling are significantly and positively related to women's career advancement in Malaysian private sector companies.

Contribution/Originality: The research findings have implication for continued education and professional development of working women, work life balance, stereotyping of women, imposition of glass ceiling in organizations.

1. Introduction

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets pledged to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The goal was directed at endorsing full gender equality as well as reducing economic barriers to women's empowerment based on employment, leadership, and participation in the decision-making process at global, regional, and national levels. The operationalization of this goal would mean taking actions to increase the numbers and active participation of women in all political and economic decision-making processes. The agenda set for achieving this goal was into effect from January 2016 with the dateline January 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

Among the sustainable development goals, the fifth goal is related to gender equality. Even though the world making progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment under the Millennium Development Goals, women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world. Gender equality is not only an essential human right but also the foundation for a peaceful and sustainable world. The ultimate targets of the fifth goal are to end all forms of discrimination against all women everywhere, eliminate any forms of violence, harmful practices against all women and ensure women's full and effective participation include equal opportunities for leadership at all levels.

There is a slight decrease in gender inequality from 0.308 in 2016 to 0.303 in 2017 according to the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) (DOSM, 2018). However, 22.2% of legislators, senior officials and managers were women. Malaysia lags behind many of its Southeast Asian neighbors when it comes to women's political empowerment, according to the 2018 Global Gender Gap Index report by the World Economic Forum (2019), based in Geneva. While it's overall ranking in the index was 101th out of 149 countries, Malaysia placed 131th in terms of women's representation in political empowerment, behind Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

One of the reasons that the participation rate for women is low in this country because Malaysian companies are not implementing programs to attract and retain more women at the workplace. Unfortunately, society has continuously maintained that a woman's place is at home (Jakobsh, 2012) and it is because men have traditionally been viewed as superior to women and the reason why women have been marginalized in all sectors of development. It is important to have women in organizations due to the increasing influence of women in the business world and the customer base consists of women mostly. The career advancement of women is a key element in finding out the barriers women face while climbing the corporate ladder. Barriers eventually create difficulties and limitations in women's career advancement which make it more complicated than men's career advancement.

Based on the issues highlighted, the primary determinant of this research is to identify the significant relationship between family bounded problems, gender stereotypes, glass ceiling and organization culture with career advancement among women employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Demographic Variables and Women's Progression to Leadership Positions

According to Broadbridge (2007), there are contributor and obstacles of male and women executive career, which is demographic characteristics mentioned by women, there are some differences between genders. Women seem to be sacrificing their families to advance in their career goals according to Liff and Ward (2001). However, related to work and academic experience, location of the job, managerial level, and job function; there is not much difference between men and women. Besides that, added by Broadbridge (2007), married women with children mostly faced barriers in career advancement due to their problems related to work-home. Results from his research found that women explained that facilities that help women to mix their responsibilities of home and work do not exist. Education factor also includes as concerning factors as results from Powell (1999) and Metz's (2003) studies stated that if women achieve higher education levels, it could help them to breakdown the glass ceiling. For women to

meet the requirements for full-time workers and fulfil long hours of working, women tend to become men by avoiding getting married and having a family according to [Broadbridge \(2007\)](#). Studies on women with children and career showed that those married women prefer to have no children because of work commitment ([Wirth, 2001](#)). In addition, [Tharenou \(1997\)](#) mentioned literature and stated that occupation is associated with women's career advancement.

Thus, based on the findings of the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant relationship between demographic variables and women's progression to leadership roles.

2.2. Barriers to Women's Career Advancement

Stereotyping based on sex has always been a major barrier to the advancement of women in organizations. According to [Schein \(2007\)](#), the traits attendant to these sex-stereotypes have been seeming by many to be incompatible to those required in career professionals and women basically continue to be particularly deprived by such stereotyping. Researchers show that men are believed to possess more agented abilities and women are considered to possess more communal abilities based on [Rosette and Plunkett \(2010\)](#). In addition, gender stereotypes create a 'false dichotomy' between women and men's characteristics. An example by [Rudman and Phelan \(2010\)](#) stated that gender role stereotypes affect occupation preference through affecting perceived ability and interest. A review of literature on gender stereotypes shows and proves the gender gap in top positions in management all around the world.

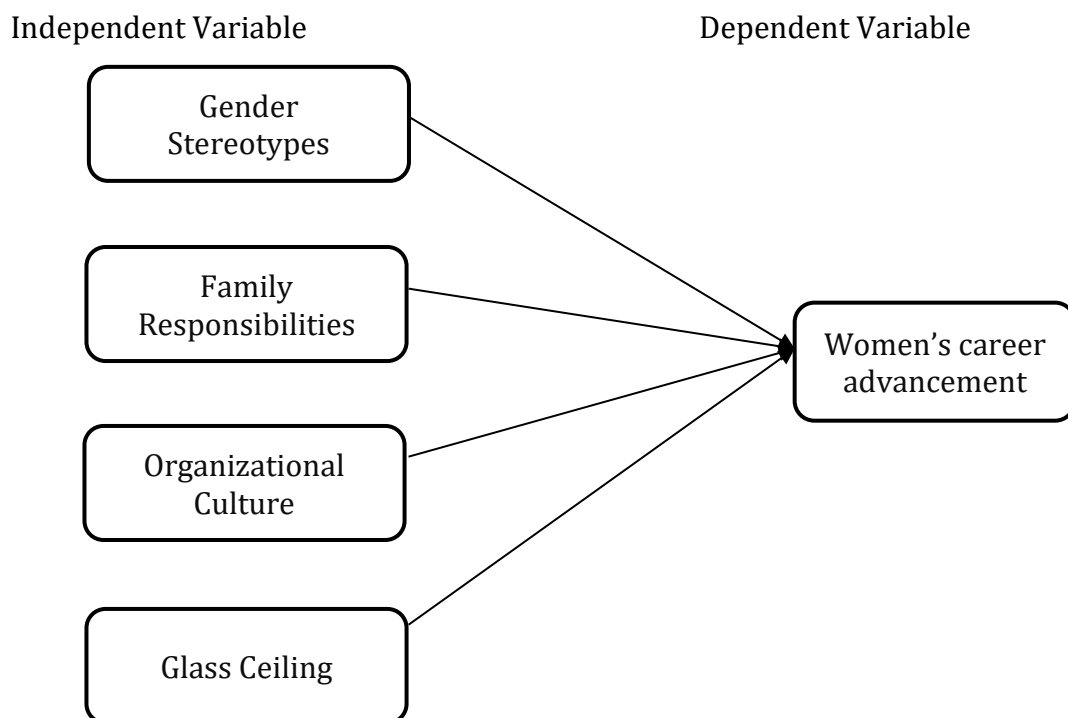
Another important barrier faced by women for their career advancement is family responsibilities ([Zhong, 2006](#)). Generally, women are perceived as the primary caregivers of the family. This has become the reason for many organizations as they would not offer senior or top management positions to women. Family responsibilities such as maternity, domestic tasks, child-rearing and the primary caregiver of the family seem to be perceiving women to be not fully committed to their work ([Ghali & Olichon, 2008](#)). For this reason, women are incapable to attain the management positions due to the negative perceptions towards them. Women eventually remain penalized in terms of career advancement even if women share their domestic relationships with their spouses. Based on [Tharenou \(1997\)](#), a woman in top management positions with family responsibilities is considered to be incompatible with the organizations. The participation of men in domestic responsibilities has increased in years and eventually helped relieve women on family responsibilities. Therefore, women gain the ability to manage their time efficiently and at the same time concentrate on their jobs to attain the opportunities for advancement in management ([Mkona, 2012](#)). Another researcher, [Sepehri et al. \(2010\)](#) stated that women continuously faced obstacles in employment, especially in promotion or advancement opportunities because of their dual role between work and family. Studies show that women with family responsibilities and housework can affect their perceptions which they believe those responsibilities are their career advancement's barriers ([Liff & Ward, 2001](#)).

Women also seem to be less ambitious than men related to the advancement of top management ([Vianen & Fischer, 2002](#)) and suggested that organizations must change the organizational culture through motivating women for achieving higher paid and

recognition. Slow advancement faced by women to achieve advancement to top management level can be due to the selection process and insufficient of female role models in the organizations. In addition, even though women and men have the same qualifications, educations, and experiences, opportunities for advancement for women remain restricted in some organizations. Several organizations still practicing job segmentation which placed men employed under the decision-making department, meanwhile women are placed in supporting departments. Nowadays, male-dominated are no longer the organization's culture since the management styles between women and men are not much different based [Zhong \(2006\)](#) and women in senior-roles have improved their behavior to align with the organization's culture. [Sepehri et al. \(2010\)](#) mentioned that organizational culture and managerial roles and gender have a link between them. The organization has been rerun by men during the 20th century while women are placed in low-level positions with little autonomy.

In Malaysia, women employees in private sector companies encounter glass ceiling in their organizations which eventually preventing them from getting promotion and acts as a barrier to career advancement ([Dimovski et al., 2010](#)). Advancement towards the high level of management is considered rare as the 'glass ceiling' still exists even though the number of women joining in the workforce and management positions increased. Generally, most research studies determined that the biggest barriers to women's career advancement are beyond their control as the Glass Ceiling Commission. Several scholars from a Malaysian university, [Dimovski et al. \(2010\)](#) conducted a survey on the glass ceiling's existence in companies resulted that glass ceiling phenomenon remains maintained in those organizations. Basically, the results showed that women in the organization encounter a glass ceiling which eventually stops them from promotion and created challenged for career advancement. The theoretical model is presented in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Barriers to Women's Career Advancement



Based on the literature review's finding, these hypotheses are proposed:

H2: There is a significant relationship between gender stereotypes and women's career advancement.

H3: There is a significant relationship between family responsibilities and women's career advancement.

H4: There is a significant relationship between organizational cultures and women's career advancement.

H5: There is a significant relationship between the glass ceiling and women's career advancement.

3. Methodology

In this research, a quantitative research approach and a correlational research design are used in measuring the barriers that hinder Malaysian women's career advancement. Statistics measurement is applied in this approach as it would provide the objectivity and general knowledge to test the hypotheses. The independent variables are barriers consisting of gender stereotype, family responsibilities, organizational culture, and glass ceiling. The dependent variable is women's career advancement. The research instrument used in this research is a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire for this research comprises of two (2) sections. Section A consists of demographic or personal information of the respondent. In this section, respondents are required to choose from multiple-choice questions which regard to their age, race, marital status, education level and job position in the company. Section B consists of statements that explore the information regarding the respondent's career advancement and statements which are related to gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational culture, and glass ceiling with women's career advancement. For sections B, the respondents were asked to express the extent of their agreement to the given statements using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from, 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree.

The main purpose of this research is to examine the barriers to women's career advancement in Nilai area. The questionnaire was established for the purpose of collecting the primary data for this study. To achieve a better understanding of the barriers faced by women in their career advancement, the questionnaires were distributed among women employees in the human resources of private organizations in Nilai area. Time constraint, cost, and type of statistical analysis to be used in the study were taken into consideration before selecting the appropriate sample size for this study. In this research, those who agreed to participate were included in the study sample. Therefore, a convenience sampling technique was used in this study. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed to the target population in the Nilai area and 130 completed questionnaires were received representing a response rate of 77.67%.

Cronbach's alpha method was used to determine the reliability of each of the variables, career advancement, gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational cultures, and glass ceiling. According to [Cronbach \(1951\)](#), this method determines the inter-item correlation among the items measuring the construct. From [Table 1](#), it can be concluded that Cronbach's Alpha of this research deemed to have adequate reliability and ready for actual survey.

Table 1: Validity and Reliability of Questionnaire

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Women's Career Advancement	6	0.893
Gender Stereotypes	6	0.857
Family Responsibilities	6	0.844
Organizational Cultures	6	0.850
Glass Ceiling	6	0.876

4. Result

4.1. Perception of Barriers Influencing Career Advancement to the Respondents

Descriptive analysis in the form of mean and standard deviation for the barriers influencing women's career advancement is presented in Table 2. The mean and standard deviation of the respondents to women's career advancement (CA, mean = 1.95, Sd = 3.348), gender stereotypes (GS, mean = 3.65, Sd = 2.540), family responsibilities (FR, mean = 3.70, Sd = 3.903), organizational cultures (OC, mean = 3.50, Sd = 3.783), and glass ceiling (GS, mean = 3.48, Sd = 4.254).

Table 2: Distribution Statistics of the Respondents Perception of the Research Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
CA	130	1.95	3.348
GS	130	3.65	2.540
FR	130	3.70	3.903
OC	130	3.50	3.783
GC	130	3.48	4.254

4.2. The Relationship between Women's Demographic Variables and their Career Advancement

H1: There is a significant relationship between demographic variables and career advancement among women employees.

Based on the results of the relationship between demographic variables (age, race, marital status, number of children, education level, job position, and work experience) and the perception of women's career advancement performed by one-way ANOVA is presented in Table 3. The results from one-way ANOVA analysis (Table 3), show that there is significant relationship between women's career advancement with age ($F_{14, 115} = 1.993, p < 0.05$), race ($F_{14, 115} = 1.578, p < 0.05$), marital status ($F_{14, 115} = 1.081, p < 0.05$), number of children ($F_{14, 115} = 1.587, p < 0.05$), highest education level ($F_{14, 115} = 1.139, p < 0.05$), job position ($F_{14, 115} = 2.628, p < 0.05$), and work experience ($F_{14, 115} = 4.243, p < 0.05$). Based on the results in Table 3, research question 1 can be answered and allow for decision to be made regarding hypotheses, H1.

Table 3: Respondents' demographic variables and women's career advancement

Demographic Variables		df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	Between Groups	14	.621	1.993	.001
	Within Groups	115	.312		
	Total	129			
Race	Between Groups	14	.645	1.578	.000
	Within Groups	115	.409		
	Total	129			
Marital Status	Between Groups	14	.254	1.081	.000
	Within Groups	115	.235		
	Total	129			
No. of Children	Between Groups	14	1.599	1.587	.001
	Within Groups	115	1.008		
	Total	129			
Highest Education Level	Between Groups	14	.315	1.139	.001
	Within Groups	115	.277		
	Total	129			
Job Position	Between Groups	14	1.592	2.628	.002
	Within Groups	115	.606		
	Total	129			
Total work experience	Between Groups	14	3.218	4.243	.000
	Within Groups	115	.758		
	Total	129			

4.3. Regression Analysis for Relationship between Independent Variables and Women's Career Advancement

Table 4, Table 5 and Table 6 present the results of the relationship between independent variables (gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational cultures, and glass ceiling) and dependent variable (women's career advancement) performed by regression. The results answer research question and test the following hypotheses:

H2: There is a significant relationship between gender stereotypes and women's career advancement.

H3: There is a significant relationship between family responsibilities and women's career advancement.

H4: There is a significant relationship between organizational cultures and women's career advancement

H5: There is a significant relationship between the glass ceiling and women's career advancement.

Based on the ANOVA results in Table 4, the model is significant ($F_{4, 125} = 3.487, p < 0.05$). This means that at least one of the 4 predictor variables can be utilized to model women's career advancement.

Table 4: Model summary of predictors of Women’s Career Advancement (a)

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	83.519	4	20.880	3.487	.000 ^b
	Residual	748.550	125	5.988		
	Total	832.069	129			

a. Dependent Variable: CA

b. Predictors: (Constant), GC, GS, FR, OC

Based on the results in Table 5, R-square value = 0.81. It means 81% of the variation in women’s career advancement can be explained by variation in any or all the predictor variables. Durbin Watson value = 1.654 which is between the acceptable range of 1.5 and 2.5. It indicates that independence residual is accepted in the model and there is no autocorrelation error in the data.

Table 5: Model summary of predictors of Women’s Career Advancement (b)

Model Summary							
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics R Square Change	Sig. F Change	Durbin-Watson
1	.317 ^a	.810	.720	2.447	.100	.000	1.654

a. Predictors: (Constant), GC, GS, FR, OC

b. Dependent Variable: CA

Based on Table 6, it shows that there is a significant relationship between women’s career advancement and gender stereotypes ($b = 0.213, P < 0.05$), family responsibilities ($b = 0.020, P < 0.05$), organizational culture ($b = 0.107, P < 0.05$), and glass ceiling ($b = 0.135, P < 0.05$).

Table 6: Correlations

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	24.280	1.443		16.825	.000	
	GS	.213	.067	.281	3.182	.002	.921
	FR	.020	.069	.031	.294	.000	.644
	OC	.107	.106	.159	1.008	.000	.289
	GC	.135	.085	.226	1.593	.000	.357

a. Dependent Variable: CA

The result indicates that all significant variables have variation inflation factors (VIF) values that were very low (< 10) indicating that there is no problem with multicollinearity. Thus, based on the results of the regression analysis, H2, H3, H4, and H5 are not rejected. According to Table 6, the highest standardized coefficients value is gender stereotypes with $\beta = 0.281$. Then, followed by glass ceiling with $\beta = 0.226$; organizational cultures with $\beta = 0.159$ and family responsibilities with $\beta = 0.031$. As a

result, gender stereotypes are the strongest predictor of the barriers to women's career advancement, followed by glass ceiling, organizational cultures, and family responsibilities.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Relationship between Demographic Variables and Women's Career Advancement

A review of relevant literature shows that there is an association of demographic variables with women's career advancement. Studies by [Liff and Ward \(2001\)](#) found that women may face difficulties as they must sacrifice their family to achieve their career goals. Like previous studies mentioned that married women prefer to have no children due to work commitment ([Wirth, 2001](#)). In this research, results found that women employees in private sector companies have no significant difference between married and unmarried women in career advancement. Thus, the finding is not supported by [Wirth \(2001\)](#).

However, related to educational qualifications, this research finding indicates that most women employees have bachelor's degree with 72.3% of the respondents. Previous studies mentioned by [Wentling \(2003\)](#) that education is an important aspect to women for career advancement. In addition, [Ismail and Ibrahim \(2008\)](#) research stated that women's career advancement from the educational achievement point of view found that even though women are progressing, their perspectives about barriers of advancement are the same. Similarly, to [Powell \(1999\)](#) and [Metz's \(2003\)](#) studies mentioned even women able to achieve higher education levels, glass ceiling could be able to break down using education, knowledge, and skills. Thus, the result of the findings proved that majority of women are well educated, and their education is an important factor to gain top management positions.

5.2. The Relationship between Independent Variables and Women's Career Advancement

Based on the results of the regression analysis, findings of this research proved the idea of the previous studies that found there is a significant relationship between gender stereotypes and women's career advancement. This is consistent with the research findings by [Diekman and Goodfriend \(2006\)](#) as gender role stereotypes are important when considering the number of women increasing in pursuing jobs and top-level managerial positions. There are several similar research conducted about stereotypes as gender gap in top positions in management all around the world continue to exist.

The results of the current research illustrated that there is a significant relationship between family responsibilities and women's career advancement. The findings are highly supported by previous research who believe that family responsibilities are one of the barriers against women's career advancement. Studies by [Zhong \(2006\)](#) identified that family responsibilities are an important barrier faced by women for their career advancement. As mentioned by [Ghali and Olichon \(2008\)](#), due to the reason that women are responsible for family responsibilities and child-rearing, they are being perceived to be not fully committed to their work. Respondents of this research agreed that family responsibilities have turned out to be the issues for them to attain management positions.

Studies have found that organizational culture and women's career advancement which specify that organizational culture is correlated to opportunities for women placement in management. Previous studies found that there is isolation for women promoted into top levels of management as the 'men's club' continue to exist in the organizations. The results of this research found that even women and men share similar qualifications, educations, and experiences, advancement for women remain to be restricted in some organizations. This can be proved and supported by previous research as organizational culture does not imply the motivation for women to achieve higher management positions and women tend to be less motivated and ambitious related to career advancement (Vianen & Fischer, 2002). Moreover, some organizations remain in practicing job segmentation by placing men under decision-making departments meanwhile women are placed in supporting departments. The findings of this research concerning women's career advancement agree that organizational culture acts as a barrier to their career advancement.

In Malaysia, women employees in private sector companies encounter glass ceiling in their organizations which eventually preventing them from getting promotion and acts as a barrier to career advancement (Dimovski et al., 2010). Advancement towards the high level of management is considered rare as the 'glass ceiling' still exists even though the number of women joining in the workforce and management positions increased. Another research mentioned that organizational structure created job assignments that prevent women from rising to the top management positions as job assignments are regarded as main route for career advancement.

6. Conclusion

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals seek to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women. The goal target is to reduce barriers to women's empowerment since employment, leadership, and participation in the decision-making process. These research findings would help to identify the barriers of women faced in workforce and at the same ability to identify ways to overcome the issues. Even though women able to gain more achievement, cultures of gender stereotypes remain the same. The finding of this research also validates that women do acknowledge stereotype as an important factor which acts as an impediment for women's career advancement.

Additionally, this researchable to provide empirical proof to further support the element of barriers identified from past studies. Based on the findings of this research, gender stereotypes, family responsibilities, organizational culture, and glass ceiling are significant and positively related to career advancement. This result is also supported by past research relating to the barrier to women's career advancement.

An additional investigation that includes samples from many fields and businesses would provide a fuller picture of the variables affecting women's professional advancement in Malaysia. The women would have a greater chance to express their thoughts using a mixed study strategy that uses both quantitative and qualitative analyses. To analyze the considerable disparities, the study could certainly be conducted with males as well, and comparisons based on their viewpoints might be made. To have a clearer picture of the elements impacting the advancement of Malaysian women into advanced positions, further variables should be added to the study.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by Nilai University. All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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