

## Facilitators of Women's Career Advancement in Public Service: A Study in A Developing Country

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to identify facilitators of career advancement in Malaysian federal public service especially as perceived by Muslim women. From purposive sampling technique on eight federal ministries, 241 questionnaires were distributed and 103 questionnaires were returned and useable whereby the rate of response is 43 percent. These women strongly agreed that the facilitators towards their career advancement were advice from immediate boss, education, perform abilities, commitment and dedication and seniority. They also agreed that current policies such as the same assignments and equal opportunities to further studies and pay as men facilitate them towards their career advancement. Furthermore, their religion does not prohibit them to be leaders of men and they are treated equally as men in terms of respect and authority.

**Keywords:** career advancement, facilitators, women, public service, Malaysia

### 1. Introduction

Women constitute nearly half of the world's population. They also comprise half of the workforce. Their contribution is important for the development of one country. However, they work just to supplement their family's income. This is due to their major role to look after their family. Thus, women need facilitators in order to coax them to contribute to the workforce. The developing countries also feel the need for the women's contribution to their economy, especially Malaysia to no exception where majority is Muslim. Women start to work in Malaysian public service in the year of 1903 (Janat, 1993). However, in Islam, women's contribution to society is secondary to men. Thus, what are the facilitators of these Muslim women especially in Malaysian federal public service? This paper will try to answer this.

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1. Definition of Career Advancement

Career advancement is a consequence of individual, socio-psychological, and organizational factors (Newman, 1993). Thus, there are lots of facilitators of career advancement in terms of these three perspectives.

#### 2.2. Facilitators of Women Career Advancement

Newman (1993) has identified advanced education, continuous full time employment, ability, hard work, professional contacts and luck as the facilitators of career advancement in diminishing order. Kanter (1977) agreed that women perceived the need to work harder and outperform their male colleagues in order to succeed. The equal pay, civil right and anti-discrimination acts also facilitate women to work and advance in their career. However, according to Naff (1995), having male mentors facilitate women to advance in their careers. This is due to male mentors seemed to hold more powerful positions in the organization. Furthermore, according to Hojgaard (2002), facilities and working condition such as maternity leave, easier

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access to extended leave, child leave and flexible working time are some of the family friendly policies issued by the public sector in order to facilitate women to work in their sector. Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2009) in their study stated that women executives highlighted the importance of support networks within the organization and in the industry or profession in general to stimulate their career achievement. Burke, Konyucu and Fiksenbaum (2006) found that women who reported more supportive organisational experiences were more engaged in their work and were more job and career satisfied.

Olson and Pringle (2004) highlighted on the qualities that women need to possess in order to advance in their careers such as creativity, risk taking, self confidence, able to make decisions and think strategically, possess people skills and being politically astute. Meanwhile, Dreher and Ash (1990) stressed on having the opportunity to display talent and competence to senior management and to acquire information through informal network as the facilitators.

Mobility, according to Lewis (1992), is the real factor in advancement. On the other hand, Vert (1985) asserted that spouse support is very important in facilitating women's career advancement. Contrarily, Naff and Thomas (1994) stated that postponing marriage or remain childless could help women to advance in their careers.

### **2.3. Organizational Policies for Women Career Advancement**

A change in organizations' policies can help women to shatter attitudinal glass ceiling that they encounter throughout their careers (Sandhu & Mehta, 2007). Therefore, organizations should formulate policies that support career advancement for women. Burke et al. (2006) and Arokiasamy et al. (2011) suggested organizational policies that enclose the following criteria i.e. top management support and commitment, the explicit used of gender in decision making and recruitment, career planning and employee development, the provision of rewards for providing the required support and achieving agreed upon goals for women's advancement, flexibility in work and better promotional structure.

### **2.4. Women Career Advancement From Islamic Perspective**

Islam emphasizes on women's right to practice their religion as equal believers as well as their rights of access to education, employment, entrepreneurship and political participation (APMM, 2009). In short, Islam prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender (Syed & Ali, 2010). Thus, Muslim women are permissible to earn their own income and allowable to work provided that they seek permission from their husbands (Nooh, 2006) and adhere to Islamic ethics the same as their male counterparts (Syed Ismail & Abdul Ghani Azmi, 2009)

### **2.5. Women Career Advancement in Malaysian Public Service**

According to Shahrizat (NST, 2011), women at the top management have increased to 32.3 percent. There are few top Muslim women managers in Malaysia like Zety Akhtar Aziz as the National Bank Governor, Nooryah Md. Anvar as the Chief Royal Traffic Malaysia, Siti Norma Yaacob as the Chief Judge Malaysia, Professor Dr. Sharifah Habsah as the Vice-Chancellor of the National University of Malaysia (Suhid & Ahmad, 2010) and Professor Dr. Zaleha Kamaruddin as the Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia.

Meanwhile, women at the decision-making level in Malaysian public sector are only 20 percent from the overall workforce (Ministry of Women Affairs, 2010). In conjunction with this, the 10th Malaysian Plan Report stated that Malaysia's government has put serious effort to enhance numbers of women's involvement in the decision making level. The report also suggested that women should be provided with opportunities and environment mindset to enable them to get involved actively in the national development process (Bernama, 2011). Meanwhile, the number of female enrolment for bachelor, master degrees and PhD in 2010 was 208, 552 (Ministry of Higher Education Statistics, 2011). The issue of low number of women involvement in decision making whereas the high number of female students enrolment in higher education institutions rise concern that studies need to be conducted to examine what are the factors that could lure women to join Malaysian public service. It is also important to find what factors that could facilitate women to be successful in public service.

### 3. Methodology

Federal public service is the population of this study. This is due to its function as the main employer in Malaysia. However, the data was collected purposively by choosing ministries which were perceived to be masculine in nature such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and others. It is assumed that women's career advancement is harder in these organizations. Furthermore, data was collected from Muslim women in top management and professional and managerial posts. Based on the literature review, a questionnaire was developed which later was tested on five female public managers. From their feedback, the questionnaire was edited. The final questionnaire was sent to 241 respondents in eight ministries.

### 4. Findings

From 241 questionnaires distributed, a total of 105 completed questionnaires were returned but only 103 were usable. This amounted to 43% rate of response. Majority of the respondents were Malay women (97.1%), aged in between 26 to 35 years old (53.4%), married (66%) for six to 10 years (21.9%), possessed a bachelor degree as the highest education or qualification (68.2%) and earn in between RM2000 to RM3000 for their basic salary (48%). They have been in their current position that is professional and managerial post of grade 41 (91.3%) from one to five years (92.2%). Please refer to Table 1 for the details.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Factors	Frequency	Percentage
Race (Malay)	100	97.1
Age (26-35 years old)	55	53.4
Marital Status (Married)	68	66
Length of Marriage (6-10 years)	23	21.9
Qualification (Bachelor Degree)	71	68.2
Basic Salary (RM2000-3000)	42	48
Position (Professional & Managerial)	94	91.3
Tenure (1-5 years)	95	92.2

Majority of them have in between one to five children (52.4%). Their parents had worked in the public sector as they do (30.5% & 15.2% respectively). Majority of them spent 10 hours at work per day (47.6%) whereas they spent from one to five hours for their household chores (37.1%). They sometimes bring work back home (61.4%). However, they are not the primary provider of the family (66%). Thus, they put family as the first priority (63.1%) whereas career as the last (41.7%). This shows that these women are very committed with their work even though it is not their first priority.

Majority of them were satisfied with their current positions (63.1%), salary grade positions (62.1%), and power (64.1%). Thus, they have not applied for promotion (79.6%). This is because they only have been working in the public service for not more than five years (46.6%).

These women strongly agreed that the facilitators to their career advancement were advice from immediate boss (45.6%), education (35%), perform abilities (29.1%), commitment and dedication (26.2%) and seniority (13.6%). Please refer to Table 2 for further details.

Table 2: Facilitators of Career Advancement for Muslim Women

Factors	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Advice from immediate boss	47	45.6
Education	36	35
Perform abilities	30	29.1
Commitment and dedication	27	26.2
Seniority	14	13.6

These women agreed that women were given the same assignment (65%) and equal opportunities to further studies (32%), the rules treat them equally (58.3%) with the same trust and confidence (56.3%) and they are paid equally as men (42.7%). Please refer to Table 3 for the details.

Table 3: Policies on Career Advancement

Attitudes	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Women are given the same assignments as men	67	65
The rules treat men & women equally	60	58.3
Women are treated with the same trust & confidence	58	56.3
Women are paid comparable salaries	44	42.7
Women are given equal opportunities to further studies	33	32

However, they perceived that they are better than men in terms of being long term employees (50.5%) and concern of their staff (41.7%). They also believe that Muslim women are capable of leading an organization (61.2%) and thus, being physically weaker than men does not prohibit them to be leaders (46.6%).

Furthermore, they agreed that their religion i.e. Islam does not prohibit them to be leaders or managers in the organization (63.1%) and that they should be respected (61.2%) and obeyed (53.4%) as male leaders/managers. Islam also does not discriminate people on promotion based on gender but stresses on their capabilities (43.7%). However, if there are other capable males, women play secondary to them (43.7%). This is due to their family is more important than leadership in the organization (52.4%). Furthermore, even though if their husbands were sick or unemployed, their husbands were still the leaders in the family and not the women themselves (35%).

In order to facilitate Muslim women career advancement, these women agreed that their travelling time (38.8%) and geographical relocation (29.1%) to be reduced and they are to be given flexible hours (36.9%), longer maternity leave (28.2%), child care (48%) and job sharing (38.8%) or they could work from home (32%). Please refer to Table 4 for the details.

Table 4: Recommendations on Facilitators of Career Advancement

Recommendations	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Child Care	42	48
Reduced Travelling Time	40	38.8
Job Sharing	40	38.8
Flexible Hours	38	36.9
Work From Home	33	32
Reduced Geographical Relocation	30	29.1
Longer Maternity Leave	29	28.2

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

The facilitators of Muslim women's career advancement in Malaysian federal public service as perceived by the respondents were found to be advice from immediate boss, education, perform abilities, commitment and dedication and seniority. Their commitment and dedication could be seen from their total working hour i.e.10 hours per day and they sometimes bring work back home. They also agreed that the current policies such as the same assignments, equal opportunities to further studies and pay as men facilitate them towards their career advancement. This shows that the current policies and rules in Malaysian federal public service

treat Muslim women public servants with the same dignity and trust as men. Furthermore, their religion does not prohibit them to be leaders of men and they are treated equally as men in terms of respect and authority. However, when it comes to family, these women put it as the first priority rather than their career. Thus, they recommended that their employer to provide extra facilities and benefits to them such as child care and longer maternity leave. They also asked for reduced travelling time and geographical relocation. Furthermore, they requested that some changes to be made to their working structure whereby their working time should be flexible or they could do work at home or even share it with their colleagues. Hopefully, by providing these, they would be coaxed to put their career as the first priority and eventually, there would be more women sitting at the top of the organization. This is in line with their attitudes towards their capabilities that they can lead an organization, they are better in managing their staff and they are more loyal towards the organization than men.

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