



## Malaysian women in management

Noor Rahamah Hj. Abu Bakar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Social, Development and Environmental Studies, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Correspondence: Noor Rahamah Hj. Abu Bakar (email: [rahamah@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my](mailto:rahamah@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my))

### Abstract

Malaysian women account for about 34.0 percent of all employed workers in 1999 yet their entry into the workplace has by no means guaranteed them access to top jobs. This paper discusses the distribution patterns of Malaysian women in management from the year 1970 to 1999 using secondary data to take a closer look at their role as a family manager, and by means of a field study, examines how Malaysian women managers conduct themselves when managing, and explores ways of enhancing Malaysian women's participation in management. Findings point to the imperative of helping the dual-career woman cope with the domestic and work environment through the provision of such conveniences as flexible working hours, and financially accessible child care facilities. Suggestions to support career women advancement into management positions include career planning, counseling and training, senior management mentoring, helping male workers to come to terms with women managers, and the creation of informal support networks for women managers.

**Keywords:** career women, child care facilities, flexible working hours, informal support networks, women in management, work environment

### Introduction

Management, like science and engineering, is an occupational areas where women are severely under represented. Women account for about 34.0 percent of all employed workers in 1999, according to statistics compiled by the Statistics Department of Malaysia. Yet women's entry into the workplace has by no means guaranteed them access to top jobs. About 2.5 percent of the total employed female workers are administrative and management workers. They remain to concentrate in junior and supervisory management positions. Very few have managed to break through the 'glass ceiling' to occupy the top jobs. The number of female administrative and management workers is very small compared to other category of work. However, the number seems to had increased compared to only 0.08 percent of women in this category in 1970. The influx of women into the workforce has been one of the dominant social trends during the past 30 years. Women are also responsible for the growth in employment since the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1999, the number of women employed rose from just under 0.9 million to 3.0 million. Yet, writings and discussions about Malaysian women in management are still relatively small in number. The objectives of this paper are four fold. The first objective is to discuss about the distribution patterns of women in management from the year 1970 to 1999 using secondary data. The second objective is to look at the role women play as a family manager. The third objective is to examine how women in management conduct themselves when managing and also when being managed by her superiors. The final objective is to discuss the positive approaches or strategies to helping women into management.

## Methodology

Macro and micro studies were conducted to obtain data. At the macro level, library research was carried out. Secondary data are collected from the General Report of the Population Census for the year 1970, 1980 and 1991 and the Eight Malaysia Plan 2001-2005. A sampled survey was used to get primary data. The data used in this research was taken from a bigger research that had been carried out. Purposive sampling was used. Sampling unit of 12 families are chosen from families that have three generations whether they are in the nucleus or extended family unit. The second generation was set as the main sample according to the highest level of education received. The respondents are chosen using snowball technique. Data of the 12 families are gathered using the "life history method." By using this method, information regarding individual's attitude towards formal work can be obtained. In this working paper, respondents classified as the first level managers or supervisory managers was selected. In-depth interview was used to obtain the required data and information. Discussion in this paper was divided into three parts. The first part look at the distribution patterns of women in management using secondary data. The second part examines how woman manage their family and work based on empirical study and the third part is some suggestions as to how to help more women to be involved in management and at the same time minimize the pressures they had being a family manager and holding a post at the managerial level.

## Discussion

### *Based on secondary data*

The growth in women's jobs in Malaysia has occurred in almost all sectors of employment and in a small number of jobs seen as being traditionally feminine. The sectors where jobs have been created over the past 10 years have tended to be those where women were already an important part of the labour force. The biggest increase in the number of women employed has been in clerical and service jobs, and while there has been a significant proportion of women with good educational qualifications moving into more senior positions. These jobs remain concentrated in public sector work such as teaching. In 1999 about 58.0 percent of women in work were employed in service industries, compared with only 27.0 percent in the manufacturing industry (Social Statistical Bulletin 1999). Within service industries, the largest concentration of women's jobs are in community, social and personal services. About 16.0 percent of women worked in this sector in 1970, compared with 28.0 percent in 1999. Within manufacturing industry, women's jobs are concentrated in the manufacture of electrical machinery, apparatus, appliances and supplies, textiles and other labour-intensive industries.

The industrial shift that occurred among the employed correspond to the occupational changes. Statistics showed that many women worked as managers, government executive officials and as accountants and auditors. In 1970's about 3.1 percent of the employed women are doing administrative and managerial work. However, the pattern is not the same as in 1999. Notable increased occurred whereby the percentage increased to 21.5 percent in 1999 (Table 1).

The participation pattern among women administrative and managerial workers was influenced by the women's life cycle. Their participation rate increase at its highest in the age group 25 - 29 years in 1991 and started to decline in the age group 30 - 34 years until the age of retirement (Table 2). The emergence of this work pattern means that the characteristics of the typical working women still exist over the years.

**Table1. Distribution of women workers by selected occupational group**

Occupation	1970		1980		1991	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Accountants & Auditors	136	0.01	1666	0.12	6628	0.34
Legislative officials & government administrators	152	0.02	1026	0.08	1536	0.08
Managers*	593	0.06	2655	0.19	24674	1.3
Government executive officials	400	0.04	3463	0.25	7167	0.38
Managers (wholesale & retail trade)	162	0.02	500	0.04	1342	0.07
Managers ( catering & lodging services)	110	0.01	431	0.03	1518	0.08
Plantation managers & supervisors	302	0.03	573	0.04	973	0.05
Others	960362	99.81	1355020	99.25	1858531	97.70
<b>Total women in employment</b>	<b>962217</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1365334</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1902369</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Malaysia 1970, 1980, 1991 (a) & (b) & 1995

Note: in bracket denotes percentage

\* includes

- general manager
- production managers (except farm)
- construction managers
- managers, recreation and entertainment services
- managers, financial institutions
- managers, mining and quarrying
- managers, electricity, gas, water and sanitary
- managers, transport services
- managers, not elsewhere classified

**Table 2. Women administrative and managerial workers by age group, 1991**

Age group	No.	%
10 – 14	4	0.02
15 – 19	220	0.84
20 – 24	3190	12.14
25 – 29	7278	27.70
30 – 34	6874	26.16
35 – 39	4531	17.25
40 – 44	2463	9.38
45 – 49	947	3.60
50 – 54	512	1.95
55 – 59	124	0.47
60 – 64	71	0.27
65 – 69	34	0.13
70 – 74	15	0.06
75 and over	8	0.03
Total 10 +	26271	100.00
15 – 64	26210	

Source: Malaysia 1991

### *Findings of the empirical study*

#### The role women play as a family manager/single women officer

As more and more women enter management, they will also have to face the strains of maintaining their dual roles, as family manager and women in management. Nevertheless, my respondents who are married do not have difficulty in terms of their role as a family manager. They do get a helping hand from their husband in doing the housework and childcare. To what extent does the man really help the wife? According to my respondents, they do nearly all the housework. They frequently work a double shift, at work and at home and spend more time on home and childcare duties compared to their husbands. According to Aida who worked as an assessment officer:

My daughter aged seven is being taken care of by a friend. My husband will send her every morning and it will be my turn to fetch her every evening after work. This duty looks like a normal routine but at times it put pressure on you especially when my daughter or the carer is sick. I have to take leave. I was lucky to have an understanding husband (a general manager in a private company) that helped with the housework such as to put the clothes into the washing machine and hang it out. Usually this was done at night or in the morning before going out to work. I work six days a week while my husband work five days a week. He will help to clean the house over the weekend especially on Saturday.

Another respondent who worked as a nursery teacher get help from her husband who worked as an engineer in an automobile industry in doing jobs such as washing the clothes and cleaning the house. She do not have a helper although she can afford it and the housework is always carried out over the weekend. Respondent started her daily routine as early as between 4.00 a.m – 5.00 a.m. and ends between 10.00 p.m – 12.00 midnight. She has to get up early to do the daily domestic task before going out to work. In the morning, domestic work carried out are cleaning the house, preparing breakfast and washing the clothes. After work, she will do the cooking and bathing the children. Holding a high position in the organization as an engineer or accountant does not hinder men to do the housework.

Certainly, in dual-career couples, careful planning and organization can help to alleviate some of the domestic pressures. In addition to providing inadequate day care nursery facilities, many organizations still make little provision for career women who take time out to raise children, and then return to the workforce to continue their careers. An internal auditor in a banking organization described their policy towards returning to the workforce:

More women are now proving that they can do the job and are committed to a career. There is still this thing from male managers that it's no good putting money into training women because they are going to leave in a few years anyway to have children. I think women have got to show either they are not going to leave at all, or if they do, they are going to return very quickly. They must have the opportunity to come back.

Complaints relating to inconsideration and lack of understanding from married male peers to the plight of the unattached female officer are plentiful, as this senior officer highlights:

Often men who organize inconvenient committee meetings and overnight stays have no conception that as one single woman living alone, I have to make very special arrangements. I don't have someone to do my ironing or have a meal ready for me when I get home. Often, they will say to me, 'Well, I do wash up', and I think, yes but who has bought the washing-up liquid you use? Being single, there is no one to share my domestic burden.

Certainly, having a fulfilling career, without a strong support system at home can be a major problem, especially for those who live alone. A 51-year-old administrative officer who was single described her dilemma:

Although I enjoy living alone, I have to do a lot of socializing and working in the evenings, and not having a 'wife' at home is one of the most stressful things for me and the other single working women I know. Unlike my male colleagues who are married, I have no one to help with my shopping and cleaning. The way I cope with this is to plan my time very carefully.

It seems that women in this situation appear to cope best when they organize and allocate times in their working week to specific domestic, social and relaxation periods. According to my respondents, single working officer have the habit of spending late evenings at the office and taking more work home. In addition, single women do not have helper, other than a part-time cleaner. For them, living alone gave them freedom. However, the isolation was sometimes intense, and it is important to cultivate network of supportive friends.

#### Relationships at the workplace

Discussion about relationships at workplace for women in management will include the nature of relationships and social support from one's superiors, colleagues and subordinates. The respondents I have interviewed assert that they generally received encouragement from superiors, and relationships were usually good. According to Aida who worked as an assessment officer:

Women workers are more suitable working under a female boss. However, I myself had a male superior. I generally received encouragement from my boss and work relationship were usually good. He do not have the assumption that women are poorly qualified. In order to gain additional support from my boss, I have to succeed in being perceived as being more competent than my male counterparts. The reason for preferring a woman boss was that I thought woman understood better the problems of other women. Relationship with my male and female colleagues is also good. In terms of salary there is no discrimination. However, there appeared to be a sex differential with regard to promotion. The chances for promotion depends on the individual's capabilities and are more open for the male workers. Women workers compared to their male colleagues require additional qualities to be able to succeed in her career. With regards to female subordinates, I prefer having women to work for me. They are serious and harmonious when carrying out their job. They can also relate as a person and there is an ability to have a social relationship which does not mean to say that you meet outside of work. In the work context there is a social dimension, which means there is a person-to- person relationship. Having said about the positive aspects of women in managerial position, I should said that women holding managerial position should have additional qualities to be able to succeed in her career. Women should be efficient in carrying out her work, have potentials to be an administrator, and committed to the work place.

Linda, aged 28 years old is the eldest child in the family, had a son aged 4 months. The highest level of education received by Linda is a first degree, majoring in accounting from a local university. She had been married for two years to a an assessment officer. She had been working as an auditor for nine years, that is in 1995 since before marriage with a monthly salary of RM2700.00. She choose to work as an internal auditor, her first job because of her qualification. As Linda had said:

Woman is more appropriate to work with a male boss and which I had one. Male superior is more flexible. He does tend to treat me differently from my male colleagues. My boss tend to rely on me more as I think he see me as being more efficient. From my opinion, although my boss act positively, the pressure is still there to be better than a male. With regard to relationships with colleagues, I feel women should work hand in hand with male and female colleagues. However, I see that my male colleagues of similar or equal status are competitive, create stress, and at times seem to be threatened by them. Male colleagues see me as still have some opportunity for

promotion. Some men feel particularly threatened because they see their organization increasingly promoting a few women to take up certain positions in various departments and levels in the hierarchy. Most men are not 'outwardly' bothered by losing in the promotional stakes to a 'competent woman', but are very distressed about a 'less competent' woman achieving success over them. My relationship with male and female subordinates are also good. With the few men I have had working with me, I treat them the same as the women. Most of the men who worked for me have carried out their work efficiently. They are approachable and can discuss the problems they are having with work. For a woman like me to achieve success in my career, I need to be open minded and be creative.

Ita is the second generation in the family. Her highest level of formal education is the Diploma she received from a private college. She is married for four years and had two children, the eldest a boy age three years old and the second one was a girl aged seven months. Ita worked a documentation quantity officer in a private firm. Although she had been working for six years, her boss always insist her to further her studies. This lead to problems because she is not ready due to her responsibility towards the family and have to assist her husband in terms of finance. This is her first job and had been working before getting married. Her husband give full support for her to continue working. Her work place is quite far from her place of stay and it takes about 45 minutes driving. She had no problems about her two children because they are being taken care of by her own mother who stayed nearby. Usually she reached home at about 7.00 p.m. Her husband is working as a remiser and do not have a fixed working hour. Ita was asked to indicate whether she preferred working under a male or female superior. Some interesting outcome were observed:

I am working under a male boss and I preferred male to female boss. I feel there is interpersonal difficulties in working with women, such as that women superiors might be quarrelsome and stiff. Men boss were more helpful and tolerant. They also possess qualities such as efficiency, hard working, frankness and realism. With regards to relationship with colleagues and subordinates, there is no differences. My female and male colleagues and subordinates give full support. We work together and there will always be a two-way communication.

Zahrah, aged 51 and still single worked as an administrative officer at the Finance Ministry. She preferred women to work under a male superior because it is suitable for a man to be a leader and more harmonious when carrying out the job. Asking her viewpoint of being a single women officer, '...remaining single had proved a distinct advantage career-wise in management. In particular, the single women officer, especially when she reaches the age of 30, is often taken more seriously by her organization in terms of promotion'.

### **Suggestion for the advancement of women into management**

The number of women entering management is still very small. However, the absolute number had increased in 1991 as compared to 1970. With the large number of women entering management, it is incumbent on organization to develop corporate personnel policies that will minimize the current pressures on women, particularly working women with families. Such policies cover flexible working arrangements, career planning, childcare provisions and training.

#### *i) Flexible working arrangements*

There is a wide range of flexible working arrangements that organizations can provide for the male and female employees to help them to accommodate changing family patterns. They are flexitime, flexiyear and part-time work. Flexitime is obviously one good example. In order that a dual-career wife or husband can meet the psychological responsibilities associated with their children's education, many parents feel that they must take their children to children and /or pick them up. This is very difficult to accomplish

under the usual 9 to 5 (or later) working arrangements, and would be made much easier under flexible working hours conditions. Flexitime is not only useful during the working week but also to school holiday times.

Another innovative form of flexible working arrangement is flexible working years or flexiyear. Within this system, employees working hours can be decided for the whole year and then individuals are free to choose their own working times in order to fulfil the yearly quota. This has advantages for both the employee and the organization. The employee is provided with the flexibility to work longer hours at certain periods and reduce working during periods such as school holidays, while retaining a secure and regular system of payment. Payment is by means of a regular monthly salary, regardless of the number of hours worked during that period. The benefits to employers will obviously depend upon the nature of the organization. This benefit enable employers to handle seasonal or cyclical fluctuations because of a more flexible workforce. The firm is able to take full advantage of a vast pool of full-time, part-time, job-sharing and seasonal staff. By fitting working time to people's needs, there is greater productivity and lower absenteeism and turnover.

Another more flexible working arrangement would be part-time work in a variety of different forms such as limiting the number of days a week, limiting the number of hours in a day or shortening the working week by allowing individuals to work three or four-day, 40-hour weeks.

#### *ii) Career planning*

This include V-time (voluntary reduced time) and career-break schemes. Voluntary reduced time is a system that allows full-time employees to reduce working hours for a specified period with a reduction in salary. It differs from the usual concept of part-time work in that it is temporary, with a return to full-time work guaranteed. All employee benefits will be maintained, although they may be altered to a pro-rata basis. Usually, the schedule remains in force for an agreed period, perhaps 6 or 12 months, to allow employees and employers to try it out, with an assurance that the commitment can be renegotiated or terminated. The 'time off' may be taken by working shorter days or weeks or a block of time may be taken, perhaps during school holidays. V-time may also be used for gaining new skills or responding to a health problem.

Career-break schemes is another form of career planning. Many women prefer to spend more time with their infants than maternity leave allows. Working women in Malaysia have the right for a 60 days maternity leave, a maximum of five times throughout her employment service. She is also eligible for leave to look after the new-born child for 90 days without pay with effective from the 61 day after her maternity leave. Husbands were given seven days unrecorded leave when their wife delivers. Maternity leave for women workers in Malaysia is still short compared to the developed countries. Various facilities should be implemented to enable mother to develop their career. Re-entry and retainer schemes should be initiated to allow them to interrupt their usual work for a number of years, after which they can return with no loss of seniority. The employee is expected to undertake at least two weeks' paid relief work for the company during each year of her absence, and is provided with regular information packs, as well as a refresher course on her return. The scheme may permit one five-year break or two shorter breaks, each dating from the end of statutory maternity leave. Career breaks are open, in principle, to men as well as women, although in practice they tend to be taken only by women.

#### *iii) Childcare*

Increasingly throughout Malaysia, organizations are beginning to provide in-house day-care centres for their employees' children although the number is very small. Employers are facing with problems in setting up childcare facilities. There are too many government requirements and regulations to be fulfilled, such as approval from the Ministry of Education, Fire Brigade Department and Ministry of Health, experts to handle the children, permanent staff, high cost child-care centres, and a suitable environment which electronic factory is not.

Childcare facilities for the children of female workers working in management can ease the transition to parenthood and can eliminate the need for extended career breaks. Difficulty in making childcare

arrangements is the primary obstacle to women returning to work after maternity leave. There are several options that can be open to working mothers, that is workplace nurseries, caring for sick children and after-school childcare.

Workplace nurseries have traditionally been provided in organizations such as hospitals which employ large numbers of highly trained women and recognize the importance of accommodating their childcare needs. The cost of setting up and running a workplace nursery is often considered to be prohibitive, but this should be seen as a benefit in kind similar to, and equally essential as, a canteen or sports and social clubs. A workplace nursery has economic as well as qualitative benefits. Savings were calculated in terms of recruitment and retaining, due to the rise in the number of women returning after maternity leave, as well as in the benefits of reduced stress, decline in absenteeism and improved time-keeping. A *creche* or on-site nursery located very near to the place of work has several advantages over other forms of childcare. Parents can see their children during the day and are readily available in an emergency, it is invaluable for mothers who return to work while still breast-feeding, and the hours coincide with those of the working day.

The dilemma which occurs when a child or the child's minder is sick causes parents considerable stress. Mothers can be ill themselves because taking time off to look after a sick child was not considered legitimate by their employers. Working mothers were compelled to use up holiday time. Although paid leave to care for a sick child should be available, it must be recognized that many employers are reluctant or unable to drop everything to cope with this situation. Therefore, alternative policies should be implemented to help parents cope with a sick child without taking time off work.

Childcare problems do not disappear once a child begins school. In some ways, the situation becomes more difficult as the length of the school day is shorter than the working day. After school child-care is also important. Organization can assist by arranging to transport children from schools to their parents' workplace and by providing after-school childcare programmes. School holidays can also present a problem for children too old to attend a nursery but too young to be left alone. Organizations or groups of organizations could assist by offering holiday childcare for employees children. Perhaps more fundamentally, it is important that parents are given the opportunity to take their vacation to coincide with school holidays. Flexible working arrangements can be used to enable parents to work longer in term time and save up time to allow them a longer break during school holidays.

In addition to helping the dual-career woman cope with the domestic and work environment, it is important for organizations to encourage women to enter management, and then provide them with career opportunities once there. Suggestions needed to support the careers of female women in management include:

a) *Career planning, counseling and training*

Because of the special needs and circumstances of some women, it is necessary to plan and counsel women on their short-range job prospects and their long-term career goals. This may include a period of retraining or updating at some suitable time in their careers performance. In addition, women may benefit from 'women-only' training courses on such topics as assertion, particularly early on in their careers.

b) *Providing senior management mentoring*

To encourage and help support women in management, a system of mentoring within the organization can be useful in the corporate world. This role would entail helping the female workers to meet colleagues, to better understand the organization's informal procedures and customs, and to acquaint her with any other peculiarities of corporate life ( for example, myths about the company, or its history).

c) *Helping male workers to come to terms with women workers*

Training programmes should be established within the company to get male and female managers to share their perceptions, stereotypes, myths and feelings about one another, and particularly about the role of women in management. The goal here is to try and change male managers' views of their female counterparts, and to encourage them to be more supportive and less threatened.



d) *The creation of informal support networks for women managers*

This may be particularly helpful while women are still very much in the minority in the organization, but less necessary as they begin to establish themselves in larger numbers and throughout the organization.

## **Conclusion**

Major changes in corporate and societal attitudes are necessary to herald 'real' equal opportunities at work. These changes will have to take into account factors such as the educational system, the socialization process, government policy, and political awareness. The skills to deal with the politics of organizational life are not adequately internalized in women. The reasons why women do not succeed in management is due to the lack of political awareness among women. Somehow in their education and development, women have not acquired the political skills that men have.

## **References**

- Malaysia (1970) Population and Housing Census. Volume 1.
- Malaysia (1980) Population and Housing Census. Volume 1 & 2.
- Malaysia (1986) Fifth Malaysia Plan 1986 – 1990
- Malaysia (1991) Population and Housing Census. Volume 1 & 2.
- Malaysia (1991) Sixth Malaysia Plan 1991 – 1995
- Malaysia (1995) Seventh Malaysia Plan 1996 – 2000