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AN UPWARD JOURNEY TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS:

From the perspective of Malaysian Women

Master's Thesis in
International Business

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother Sarada Aryal and to all the hard-working women

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ABSTRACT:

With increasing education, changing cultural and social taboos, and emerging diversification of workforce in the past decade has resulted in the surge of Malaysian women in organizations and in leadership roles. Despite the various limitation, the number of women entering labor market and pursuing their professional career in different sectors is remarkable. The purpose of this study is to understand the journey of women to reach and retain in the leadership roles in corporate Malaysia. Therefore, the study analyzed the various enabling supportive factors that made it feasible, the difficulties or challenges faced during their career and the strategies adopted to overcome to be in the leadership positions. Qualitative research method with case study approach was used for this study. The empirical data were collected from a semi-structured interview with middle and senior level Malaysian women from a different professional background.

The empirical findings revealed updating oneself, attending training, job learning and support from family/spouse as facilitators at a personal level. Whereas, learning and development oriented company's culture, training opportunity, flexible policies for working mothers, financial aid for job-related certifications and courses were identified as organizational level supportive factors. Additionally, negative attitude of male peers/clients, time management, discriminative behaviours from top executives, nepotism during promotions and receiving failing projects were identified as the challenges and barriers that constrained women advancement. Moreover, the study discovered the strategies such as seeking help from colleague and mentors, sharing workload issues with the immediate boss, nurturing core competencies, building strong networking, pursuing higher education and decision to remain single as the measures taken to overcome the challenges to reach and retain in the leadership positions.

KEY WORDS: Malaysia, Women, Leadership, Challenges, Facilitators, Strategies

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the study

One of the most remarkable revolutions of the past three decades is the economic empowerment of women across the world. It is noteworthy because of the extent of the change: one of the important transformations that can be identified is the diversification of the workforce (Jogulu & Wood 2008: 601). There is a visible growth in gender equality at work and in society. Now more women are educated, have entry to labour market, sit in senates, lead administrations and organizations (International Labour Organization 2016).

The change in the economic, demographic and social lifestyle has facilitated increasing numbers of women in paid employment all over the world. (International Labour Review 2009). The increasing number of industrialized economies, expanding service sector as well as the rise in profit and non-profit organizations has provided various opportunities for women globally. Consequently, there are more women in workplace and in managerial and leadership roles than decade before. (Davidson & Burke 2004; Eagly & Carli 2003; Chandler 2011).

With an increase in number of women in the workforce it can be expected their corresponding increase level in the senior, top management and leadership positions too, however women representation at top is still very low (Hoobler et al. 2011.) The recent study reported that the number of women CEOs at Fortune 500 companies plummeted by 25 percent in 2018. Women CEOs number is down from 32 to 24 within a year. The number of leading women in Fortune 500 companies had grown by 6.4 percent in 2016 from 2.6 percent a decade before (Forbes 2018).

The question now arises that what is the catch for country or organizations in promoting and encouraging females in their professional careers. There are plenty evidences that exhibit the importance of female participation in the labour force. In the study conducted by McKinsey, 15 gender equality signs were traced for 95 nations. The study revealed that, if the participation of women in the world's economy was at the same level to that of men, the gross domestic product (GDP) would add up 28 trillion U.S \$ in 2025. This

figure is roughly equivalent to size of today's United States and Chinese economy combined (McKinsey Global Institute 2015.) In addition, increase in female employment rate can be a key facilitator for those economies with lower medium-term growth expectation (Elborgh -Woytek et al. 2013; Cuberes & Teignier 2012; Esteve-Volart 2004; Klasen & Lamanna 2009; Heintz 2006). For instance, in Japan if the female labour participation rate were to reach average for the G7 countries, it would result in 4 percent rise in its gross domestic product (GDP) (Steinberg & Nakane 2012).

Furthermore, According to Barsh and Yee (2012) organizations that provide equal opportunities for its talent pool have higher chances for growth. Taar- Whelan (2009) asserts that organizations should encourage more women to aspire and participate in senior managerial and leadership roles to gain the following advantages. Women leaders can enforce policies that are related and effective for talent pools without biasness, having gender- diverse board can provide various perspectives and solutions during critical situations. Thus, this will form positive image of company for potential female talents to be associated with diversity accepting and acknowledging companies.

Even with all the above-mentioned prospects, barriers still exist for women to represent themselves on managerial and leadership positions. There are numerous existing barriers to women leadership such as gender bias, work-life balance, gender stereotyping (Olsson & Walker 2004; Rajan & Krishnan 2002), lack of access to opportunities. In addition, such career hindering factor includes non-friendly corporate environment that includes organizational culture, organizational policies (Davidson & Burke 2002; Schein 2007), glass ceiling (Schuck & Liddle, 2004), lack of mentoring, lack of networking and societal culture (Kulik 2014).

However, these challenges have contained women advancement at certain level but women are still thriving and pursuing their career goals. Hence this study aims to understand all those factors that are related directly or indirectly to women career. This study will analyse the challenges that Malaysian women faced in their professional life, the support that they received from their personal or professional life. It aims to provide some suggestions for women on how to battle the challenges and secure positions in male dominated corporate world.

1.2. Women's Representation in top Management in Asia

In the study conducted by McKinsey (2012) the proportion of Asian women represented incredibly low percent compared with the United States and Europe. Figure 1 clearly represents only 6 per cent of women in Asian countries on average holds the highest position at work. The average of women on board is three times more in Europe compared to Asian context.

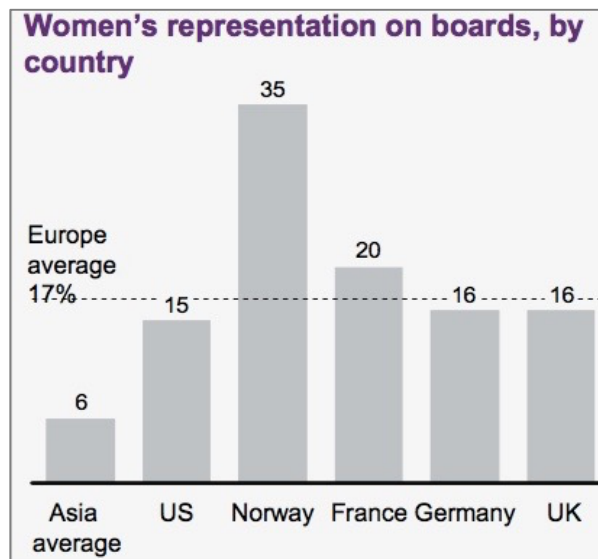


Figure 1. Women's representation on board in Asia compared with western market. (McKinsey 2011)

Percentage of women involvement in labour market varies according to country. Compared to Asia, women participation in western countries indicates drastically higher number. Data in figure 2 demonstrates that India has bottommost female labour participation rate that is 35 percent. In Taiwan and Malaysia women participation is below 50 percent. Similarly, China has the world's highest female labour participation rate however only 8 percent of women hold corporate board position (World Bank 2013.)

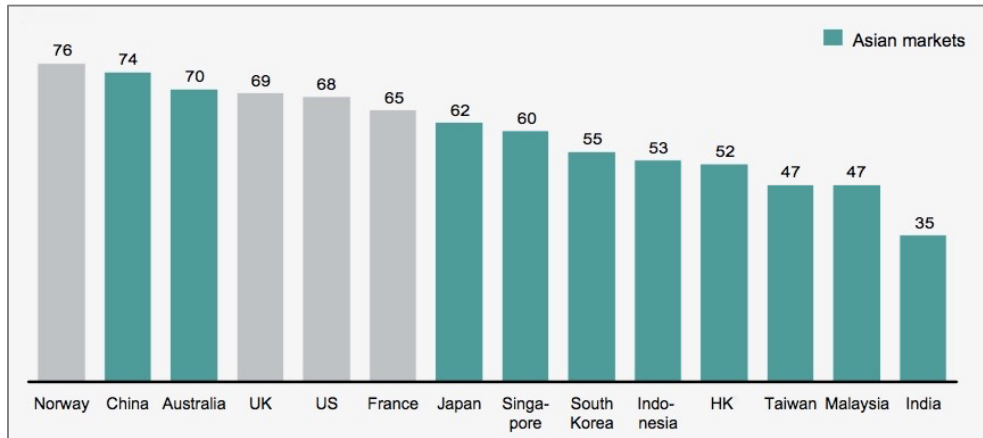


Figure 2. Female labour participation rates in the world (McKinsey 2011)

1.3. Malaysia, Country of context

This research will focus on a specific country, Malaysia one of the nations in Southeast Asia. With a population of over 30 million, it is ranked on number 44 as the most populous country in the world occupying an area 328,550 square kilometer (The World Bank, 2016).

The World Bank reports that Malaysia is successful to diversify its agriculture and commodity-based economy to leading exporter of manufacturing and service sector. Malaysia is one of the most open economies in the world attracting trade and foreign direct investment. This has facilitated in employment creation as 40 percent of jobs are linked with export sector in Malaysia. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998, Malaysia's economic growth rate shows upward mobility of 5.4 percent in average since 2010. (The World Bank, 2016). Malaysia favorable economic outlook is enabled by strong macroeconomic management, which aids for stable inflation, well-capitalized banking system and strong capital market. As an outcome of positive economy, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita has reached 9944.90 US\$ in 2017.

Malaysia's vision 2020 (known as Wawasan 2020) is a long-term developmental framework initiated towards achieving ultimate objective which is "Malaysia a fully developed country". Vision 2020 is purposed not only for economic but for development in all the other aspects: social, political, cultural and spiritual. Vision 2020 aims towards

overcoming the nine central strategic challenges that has been identified as a major constraint for prosperous Malaysia (Islam 2009). Hence, this research is initiated to understand journey of these women who can contribute in Malaysian economy and society significantly to achieve vision 2020.

1.4. Background of Malaysian Women on Top Position

According to Maideen (2015) Malaysian women go through countless difficulties and disparities due to the traditionally endured cultural taboos and male dominative attitude. Idris (2009) asserts that societies dominated by masculine approach averts women growth and development. Consequently, Malaysian women encountered family issues and sex-role conflicts. According to Koshal et al. (2012) Malaysia provides an interesting case study on attitude towards women's leadership as the nation is enduring rapid changes from its traditional cultural norms in contemporary values towards women. Dominance of men and their perceptions about women's role create greater disadvantages for career advancement of female employees in Malaysia (Ismail & Ibrahim 2008), In male dominated fields there exist doubts if women can successfully accomplish the job. Despite increasing liberalization of trade and growing economy in Asia, gender imbalance in top management position still remains a crucial issue.

However, recently Malaysia's female labour participation rate (FLPR) raised to 54.1% in 2015 prior to 46.8% in 2010. Likewise, based on statistics compiled by Bursa Malaysia women held 26.3% of top management position in all public listed companies across Malaysia in 2015. This percentage increased to 28.4% in 2016 (The World Bank 2015). These statistics reveal a substantial improvement of gender inclusiveness in the workforce as well as in the c-suite. Therefore, it is important to understand what has stopped Malaysian women in the past and why were they unable to represent themselves successfully in the leadership positions. It is equally important to understand what has facilitated them and how did they overcome several challenges.

1.5. Research Gap

The role of women in management and leadership has got most attention in recent years. There has been numerous theories and abounding written to explain reasons of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Morrison 1990; Oakley 2000; Mordi et al. 2010; Saadin 2016). However less is known regarding what has eased women professional journey. Also, earlier research regarding women's advancement emphasis more from the perspective of developed nations such as U.S and European nations.

Therefore, it would be interesting to examine the topic from different viewpoint, concerning on women who has reached to managerial and leadership position to figure out what had actually helped them to reach in those positions from Asian context. Women from Asian background traverse challenging path not only to uphold managerial and leadership role but also to participate in the workforce. There exist countless barriers (organizational, social, cultural). The cultural norms prevailing in most of the Asian country perpetuate the subordinate position of women socially and economically. Most of the societies including Malaysia has been patriarchal, where such attitude still prevails. (Niaz & Hassan 2006; Jogulu & Wood 2008). In spite of that Malaysia has made significant progress in the past to increase the participation of women in the workforce and in decision making role. As mention earlier, there is an increase of women in labour participation well as in the top management positions.

Therefore, this research tries to investigate not only the challenges that women faced but also tries to identify the facilitators and strategies Malaysian women adopted to reach and retain in the leadership position. Moreover, earlier research has not yet identified all these factors (challenges, facilitator and strategies) in single research focusing particularly on Malaysian women. So, study is relatively unexplored and it would be worth to investigate to gain new insights in women and leadership literature.

1.6. Research Question and Objective

Malaysian societies and organizations are thought to exhibit stereotypical male dominant behaviour. Many social and cultural taboos regard women as inferior gender. Despite of

these prevailing stigmas, women are trying their best to rise up high against these conventional barriers. Clearly, their efforts are paying off and the progress of Malaysian women in the labour market and in leadership positions is noteworthy. Additionally, it is essential to understand what is facilitating this progress of Malaysian women to grow to leadership positions. Therefore, the research question of this paper is:

How Malaysian women traverse an upward journey to leadership positions?

In order to answer the formulated research question, the following research objective are set.

- To find various supportive factors that enabled women to reach the leadership position.
- To pinpoint and to understand various challenges and barriers that has hindered Malaysian women's advancement in leadership positions.
- To identify and understand individual's efforts/strategies or measures taken to overcome challenges to reach and retain leadership positions.

These objectives have been posed to know and to understand the factors that helped these women prosper up to the top positions, how did these women overpower the challenges and the barriers they met on the road to success and what were those.

1.7. Delimitation of the study

Delimitations are the choices made by researcher to narrow down the scope of the research. It basically aims to state the areas that are not covered or focused on this study. The theoretical frame work will be limited to core literatures on leadership, the facilitators or what has helped them to be in the leadership positions and the barriers or challenges faced by women in their professional journey.

This study is not a comparative study of male and female leadership styles. This study does not concentrate on examining women 's leadership in the specific industry as the percentage of participation of women in the overall industry in Malaysia is less. Therefore, focusing on the specific industry will make it difficult to generalize the results.

For empirical data collection only the women leaders in middle and senior management levels will be interviewed. This report will not interview women in board level (CEO or CFO) due to resource and time constrain. Furthermore, this study will not interview male leaders. Additionally, the area of Malaysia is 127,724 mi² and industries are dispersedly located, it will not be feasible to interview all the working women's. Therefore, the study will be conducted in Kuala Lumpur capital city of Malaysia which is a business hub for many industries. This research does not focus on quantitative approach because it does not aim to describe the relationship between variables. As this topic is relatively unexplored a qualitative research approach will be adopted.

1.8. Conceptual Framework

The study is structured into five main chapters.

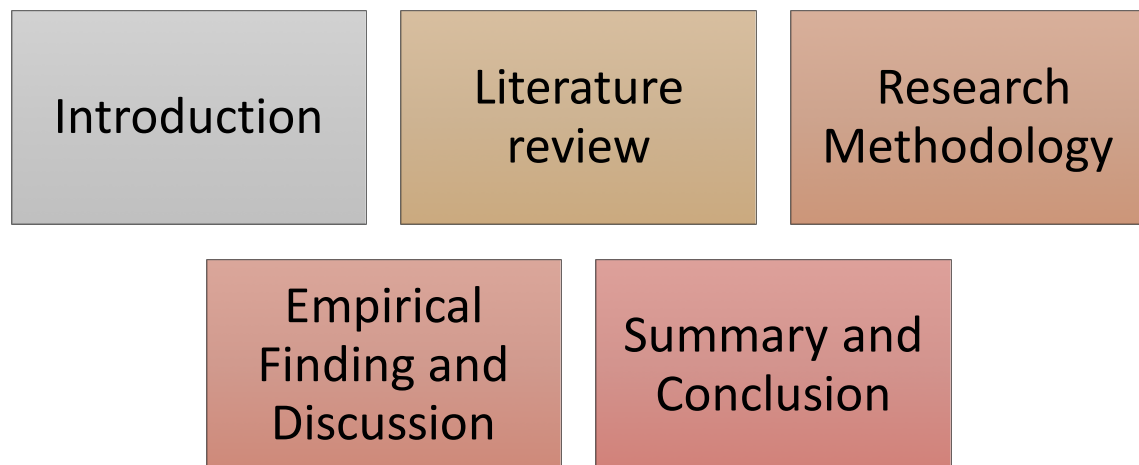


Figure 3. Structure of the study

This research consists of 5 main chapters. The first chapter provides the introduction to the study, the research question and the objective of the study. The second chapter will review the earlier existing literature in order to provide in-depth understanding about the topic. This chapter will discuss the definition of leadership, general ideas about some theories and discuss more specifically the facilitators and barriers for women career advancement.

The third chapter aims to explain all the procedures and methods that will be applied in this research. It will include philosophical approach, in addition this chapter will also outline the methods that will be used for collecting primary data. Last part of this chapter consists of analysing the data and testing the validity and reliability of the study.

Chapter four presents the results of empirical finding and discussion of finding will also be presented. Finally, chapter five draws conclusion to the thesis. It provides summary and the main findings of the thesis. Furthermore, the last chapter illustrates the managerial implications that the study has and discusses the limitations and possibilities for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present the review of literatures in the context of women and leadership. The main focus of this approach is to deliver theoretical discussion based on existing literature to support the presented research objective. This chapter will provide with the various definitions of leadership and its general theories proposed over the period of time. Moreover, it also includes gender-based leadership theories. Furthermore, the core of literature review points to the major facilitators for women to attain leadership roles and challenges or barriers that these women met on their way to leadership and how were these challenges confronted by them.

2.1. Defining Leadership

In the 19th century Thomas Carlyle briefed the idea about leadership in his theory of “great man”, where leaders were exceptional heroes who possesses traits such as intelligence, wisdom, charisma and political power to influence others. (Spector 2016). While, Stogdill (1950) addressed leadership not as persons qualities or characteristics but a process to influence. According to Stogdill (1950) leadership is ability to influence and guide individual or group towards setting and achieving the goals.

Kottler (1988) defines leadership as a process where individuals and groups are directed without any form of force or pressure, voluntarily by the followers. However, Kellerman presented different viewpoint and claimed that using coercive means is also leadership (Volckmann 2012).

Leadership is an ability to influence individual or group towards achievement of common goal or vision (Northouse 2010:3; Robbins & Judge 2013: 368). Contemporary approach suggests that leadership is a process that can be learned. However, all these definitions suggest various central elements to the phenomenon of leadership such as follows:

- Leadership is a process.
- Leadership is about persuading others.
- Leadership involves attainment of common goal and objective.
- Leaders and follower share common goals.

Leadership as a process means there is a proper interaction between leader and followers. Leaders can either positively or negatively impact on followers and followers can do the same to leaders (Bolden et al. 2003).

Leadership is about influencing i.e. being able to influence subordinates, colleagues, and supervisors in a work or organizational context. It is about inspiring and motivating others to follow the right direction. Leadership is not possible without influence (Yukl 2006)

Leadership involves achievement of common goal and objective. Leaders set the direction and lead individuals or group through various ethically based means towards the accomplishment of organizations task or vision. Leaders and followers work together to achieve the shared objective (Stogdill 1950; Kottler 1988)

2.2. Contemporary leadership literature

Burns in late 1970s developed one of the most widespread contemporary leadership theories that explain the differences between “transactional” and “transformational” leadership. According to Burns transactional leaders' emphasis on work standards and are task oriented (Burns 1978; Mandell & Pherwani 2003). Transactional leaders often adhered organizations rules and regulations and execute their leadership styles within organizational constrain (Ogbonna & Harris 2000). These leaders are focused on completing organizational activities on given time frame. Rewards and discipline is the key facilitator for achieving the desired outcome. The reward based action is intended to motivate and enhance employee's performance (Burns 1978).

On the contrary, transformational leaders exhibit inspirational values, caring, and nurturing and show consideration towards their followers. They emphasis on recognizing potential in their followers and encourage and guide them to achieve their personal and organizational goals. Transformational leaders are considered to have the competence for fostering confidence and self-worth among their followers (Burns 1978).

Additionally, Omar and Davidson (2001) states that transformational leadership is most appropriate way of leading modern organizations in western nations that has fastest

growing and changing business environment. Complex business situations added by a diversity of the workforce has initiated the rise of transformational leadership to become noticeable in organizations. Moreover, the transformational leadership style is formed around behavioural traits which motivate, enable and encourage staff and followers. This leadership aspires to collaborate and cooperate among organizational members in order to facilitated to communicate organizational strategies, directions and vision. (Omar & Davidson 2001).

One of the significant findings of the contemporary leadership research is recognizing and accepting that this leadership style to a larger extend demonstrate female natural inborn qualities like caring, participative, cooperative, nurturing and consideration (Carless 1998). This is an important discovery which shows that female managers would be able show transformational leadership style frequently and easily. The literature reviewed reflects the western perspective. However, demonstration of leadership styles of men and women can be different in non- western organizations and women in leadership roles may be subject to bias. Even though women are capable this does not guarantee that women will achieve what they desire in the corporate world (Heilman 2001: 657-674).

2.3. Leadership and Gender

Leadership is commonly understood as a process that facilitates human organization towards the achievement of common goal, mission and vision (Gardiner 2015; Northouse 2007). Primarily leadership is defined as task-oriented or interpersonally-oriented, agentic or communal, autocratic or democratic and more recently transactional or transformational (Eagly & Johnson 1990; Eagly & Carli 2003). On the other hand, gender is defined as socially constructed system of organising meaning (Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015). According to Chemers (2000) the differences between male and female leaders can be best understood by three theoretical explanations: biological differences (temperament, hormones, etc.), cultural differences (different roles) and structural difference (positions in organizational structure).

Hyde (2005) states that traditionally leadership has always related to the masculine approach, where men possess certain qualities such as autocratic, decisiveness and powerful. However, there is no any research that has validated any gender differences in the effectiveness of leadership. Despite of female manager possesses appropriate characteristics and exhibits suitable leadership styles that are highly effective in today's competitive business environment these credibility and performance of women are not evaluated fairly (Eagly & Carli 2003). Snyder (1993) expresses a similar idea; according to him women have better foundation skills essential for effective leadership. However prejudicial evaluations create barriers to their competence as leaders (Eagly & Carli 2003).

In the study conducted by Rutherford (2001) when women displayed personalities that were perceived to demonstrate men, such as autocratic, task oriented and ruling, the women were evaluated negatively. Additionally, when women displayed related qualities to men they were criticized as being 'masculine'. Therefore, when women desire to achieve leadership positions and senior management roles they are more likely to be considered as unfit for the job. Women are evaluated negatively specially in roles that are considered to be male domain. Hence, the bias activity supports to under- evaluate women and their roles (Lyness & Heilman 2006).

2.4. Women in leadership

In today's landscape of global business, women holding top positions is not surprising. Changes in economic, demographic and social aspects over the past decades have provided greater employment opportunities to women across the world. According to Omar and Davidson (2001) women involvement management and leadership position are higher in organizations than before. Collectively, the amount of senior business roles help by women stands at 24 percent in 2016. In the USA 50 percent of women are involved in management positions. More than 85 percent of *Fortune* 500 companies incorporate at least one female officer. Women in Asia-Pacific hold 23 percent of senior management roles (The Nation: 2016).

Involvement of women in organizations provides competitive edge. Women leaders offer a competitive advantage to their organizations. Survey conducted by Catalyst (2004) among 350 of the *Fortune* 500 companies discover that companies with many women involved in top positions exhibited return of equity that was 35 percent more than those with least number of senior women leaders. Similarly, another research further supports the constructive linkage between women leaders and their outcomes. In the year 1993 companies (534) first listed on the American Stock Exchange discovered that companies consisting women top management got greater valuation than their counter parts with all-male management, and the stock rate was increased subsequently for the three more years with female leaders on board. (Welbourne et al. 2007).

The power of women participation in labour market and in top positions is considered as so significant that Norway has enforced a 40 percent quota for female on company board. The mandate quota was imposed because women proved to be improving company's financial performance in Norway (The Economist 2018).

As the number of women in business world is increasing, at the same time they are also exiting from their corporate career. Departure of highly qualified women from mainstream careers is increasing (Littman 2009). Previously, family demands were a pull factor for women to leave corporate life. Various corporate remedies were created to facilitate flexible work environment and also to ensure to access talent pool over time. Study published in *Harvard Business Review* (Hewlett et al. 2005) reveals that the main reason to leave corporate life was due to high level of dissatisfaction (feel of loneliness and a desiring to be fully integrated) rather than family demands.

2.5. Facilitators for Women Career Advancement

The existing literature on women's career advancement emphasizes the importance of individual factors, interpersonal factors and organizational factors. Bilimoria et al. (2007) states that if women aspire to hold higher managerial and leadership position they must have certain personal traits (individual factors), be in a setting that facilitates and support (organizational factors) to practice and develop their skills (interpersonal factors).

Persons traits (skills, knowledge) and related behaviors (positive attitude towards career, career planning, early socialization) influence advancement. Some of the qualities demonstrated by women who enhanced their career consisted self-efficacy, motive, ambition to success, positive attitude towards relocation and mobility. (Bilimoria et al. 2007). In a recent study conducted by Francis (2017: 254) on professional women's careers in the construction industry found that individual's factors (personal traits) influenced women's career advancement more significantly than organizational and interpersonal factors. Individual determinants such as women with higher educational attainments, work experience and knowledge, played important role for career progress of women. Moreover, support from spouse and parental encouragement have been found as great help. Cimirotić et al. (2017) discovered that women with partner who also occupied managerial positions provided competent advice for women which was seen as huge source of support.

Some scholar's emphasis on the importance of social capital or interpersonal factors for career development. According to Zhong et al. (2011) external support such as mentoring and networking opportunities were crucial for women's career advancement. For instance, Apospori et al. (2006) addressed the necessity for women to show proactive behaviors in establishing mentoring relationship for career success. In an investigation regarding the connection between career success, mentoring and networking, (Bozionelos 2008) found that creating a network of organizational relationships was more crucial than having a mentor for advancement.

In addition, organizational support plays very important role in order to nurture the individual and interpersonal factors for successful career. Organizations tend to reinforce the culture, strategies, practice and policies that supports diversity, equality and opportunities for its human resource. (Ballout 2007). Therefore, literature has identified some of the factors that are essential for women career advancement such as organizational culture, supportive work environment, networking and mentoring.

2.5.1. Organizational Culture

Human capital is company's most valuable resource and this fact is widely acknowledged. Talent retention should, therefore, be the top priority for any kind of business wanting to secure sustainable achievement (Aryee et al. 2016.) It is vitally important to identify and nurture individuals in order to prepare them to access top management and leadership position in the future (Burke & Vinnicombe 2005).

Yet study shows that organization often fall short when it comes to increasing, retaining, nurturing, developing and progressing women. The enrolment of women in university to attend higher education is more. Although they are engaged in more than half of professional entry level positions; their representation shrinks to approximately 15 percent when it comes to the executive level (Catalyst 2014). Hewlett et al. (2005); Litzky and Greenhaus (2007) articulates that these data are the outcome of a combination of some women plateauing in middle management, other pursuing entrepreneurial endeavours that is more supportive career opportunities or women leaving their employers to meet family responsibilities more effectively.

According to O'Neil et al. (2008) one of the most difficult barriers to C-suite for women result from norms and organization systems that were in practise when sole male-breadwinner model was common and when women were least represented in the workforce. Therefore, it is very crucial for organizations to understand today's diverse workforce and execute strategies, structures and practices that enhance women's capabilities.

Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) defines Perceived organizational support (POS) as the employee's views regarding their organizations valuing and appreciating employee's role and their well-being. Employees tend to exhibit strong bond and feel more obligated to firms that demonstrate care for employee's well-being (Cole 2016). Experiencing a sense of perceived organizational support (POS) can result in proactive behaviors, career satisfaction, higher performance, less inclination of quitting jobs, lower turnover rates (Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002)

2.5.2. Supportive Work Environment

There are several factors which shows the interest of organizations for supporting the career aspirations of professional and managerial women (Fritz & Knippenberg 2017). These consists of increasing number of women with education, experience and track record for development, increased competitive pressure, the loss of qualified women as a result “opting out” and the need to recruit and retain “the best and the brightest”. In a three years study of top female executive Morrison et al. (1987) identified six factors that facilitated to women’s career advancement. These were top management support, an ambition to prosper, capability to manage team, risk taking and ability to be strong and decisive.

A study conducted by Catalyst (1998) discovered that one of the significant factor that contributes women’s retention and development within organizations is creating work environment that are supportive for women and implementing work-family programs. Schmidt and Duenas (2002) emphasized that organizations that wants to stay competitive in the market place have started to incorporate practices that operates well for both male and female employees. As a consequence, organizational efforts have come in form of policies to make work environment better and supportive. Family friendly policies (FFP) is created to balance work life demand and intent to support employees who have family responsibilities. It includes flexible time, childcare initiatives, maternity leaves. Childcare initiatives are keys to retain working women with children’s (ILO, 2004).

According to Rogier and Padgett (2004) companies have incorporated flexible work schedule for employees for many years due to the belief that it helps employee manger work-life balance. Being able to work with flexible time makes easier for women to balance work life demands. It helps to display their performance which will eventually facilitate to progress into upper level positions.

2.5.3. Access to social network

Bruke (1993) describes networking as the way towards reaching and being reached by

individuals within a social network and keeping up and maintaining these connections or relationship. Network can either be informal (i.e. personal contacts, professional associations) or formal and structured entities sponsored by an organization. Networking assists individuals recognise the cultural and political sides of enterprises (Ibarra 1993). Networks are a basis of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Molloy, 2005) and power (Krackhardt, 1990; Perriton, 2006; Timberlake, 2005).

Networking can happen through an assortment of activities incorporating developing relations, joining proficient affiliations, and looking for high-visibility assignments (Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Research shows that social networks are important for various reasons, including securing a job, organizational learning, advancement and promotion.

Questions have been raised regarding if the women's and men's career are equally benefited from networking. Men and women both establish network in order for career progress. Several studies have discovered that there are fundamental contrasts in the structures of women's and men's network which impact their effectiveness. According to Knouse and Webb (2001) women tend to build network which are smaller in size and have stronger tie (i.e. contacts have solid connection to the individuals). While men's network has weak ties and diverse and broad range in membership, tend to facilitate to achieve more benefits like upward mobility (Ibarra 1997).

Study found that women's have less developed and less influential social networks as a consequence it provides less opportunities within the organizations and in the external labour market (Forret 2006). For instance, study conducted by Bruke et.al (1995) found that women's network comprises of more women than man and men had more men in their network than did women. Given that more men typically hold higher-level managerial roles than women (Schein 2007), the ties and connections of women are less likely to provide the career advancement opportunities. Similarly, research reveals that networking strategies which works for men not necessarily benefit women's in a same way. For example, Forret & Dougherty (2004) found that using networking to increase internal transparency was more in favour of promotions for men but less for women.

2.5.4. Women's Network

The formation of women's network within organization began as a response to the ongoing exclusion of women from male dominated networks which provides advice, information (Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Ibarra 1993; Linehan & Walsh, 1999) access to mentors and other positive developmental activities for career advancement (Brass et al. 2004). Women's in-company networks aid women to structure their skills and develop their understandings to flourish in that typical setting. They are usually supported by the firm and their main functions are to counsel senior executives, to organize networking events and to hold various mentoring programs. (Bierema 2005.)

Some studies have shown positive outcome of women's network for the members and organizations. In the study conducted among twenty female managers Cross and Armstrong (2008) stated positive result from participating in women's network. It was found that women's network created a platform for individuals to transfer their knowledge and experiences and strategies for finding a mentor. Similarly, Pini et.al (2004) discover that women's network was supportive to foster a collective identity and lessening of feelings of isolations. According to Vinnicombe et al. (2004) organizational benefits from these networks includes retention of qualified women, positive change in culture and organizational learning. Likewise, Catalyst (1999) identified association with formal women's network as fundamental in facilitating women traverse masculine work setting and environment

In contrast, some studies have found negative results of women's network. Women may voluntarily dedicate their time and energy to reach their network goals without any meaningful returns and these networks lack diversity beyond gender. In the study conducted by Bierema (2005) women's network among ten members in Fortune 500 companies failed because women had many responsibility and work overload and they could not dedicate their time for networks. Women battled to take additional networking task with the already existing work pressure. (Bierema 2005: 215).

2.5.5. Mentoring

Organizations have shown keen interest in nurturing their human capital. Mentoring is one of the key tool that has been frequently explored in this quest. Therefore, increasing number of formal mentoring programs are implemented in most of today's organizations. (Wanberg et al. 2003). Having mentor can assist both men and women to advance. This is because mentors are proficient, experienced, highly ranked and influential member who assists for career development of individuals with less experience. (Ragins & Kram 2007.) Mentoring programs can be effective in supporting women to overcome barriers and facilitate women to hold leadership positions, for a various reason. Mentors provide inside information related to job functions, they offer guidance and training, they help women to overcome some of the obstacles they encounter during their career period such as discriminations and gender stereotypes. Mentors support and encouragement can foster optimism in women's career prospects, boost their self-confidence and increase their job satisfactions which eventually contribute to reach their career goals (Burke et al. 2006).

According to Ragins & Kram (2007) mentors provide both career functions and psychosocial functions. In terms of career function mentoring relationship can be fruitful depending on mentor's positions and their influencing capacity and at times their gender can play important role as well. Studies suggests that mentoring has maximum influence for women working in male dominated professions, particularly if they have powerful male mentor (Ramaswami et al. 2010). Females working in male dominated workplace are in special need of sponsorship and legitimacy. One study of a male dominated industry demonstrated that senior male mentoring was crucial for female lawyer's career but was unavailing for male lawyers (Ramaswami et al. 2010). Tharenou (2005) examined 3220 men and female working in public and financial sectors in Australia. Result showed that career mentoring support enhanced women career advancement more than men's and women received more benefits from mentoring provided by female mentor.

Additionally, study shows that mentoring has been related to employee satisfaction and higher salaries. Dreher and Ash (1990) conducted a study among 147 women and 173 men in order to find connection between mentoring, gender and career outcomes. They noticed that those individuals who had wide mentoring connections received promotions,

generated more income and had job satisfaction due to better payments and benefits compare to those with few mentoring relationships (Dreher & Ash 1990: 539).

To sum up, there are many factors that enable women to climb up the leadership roles, each one of them being important in its own place. As quoted earlier, the factors range wide from culture in organization to mentoring. Whereas, the organizational environment being the most crucial element that is serves as a basic building block for women to advance up the hierarchy. Moreover, the organizational policies, structures and practices should be planned in such a way that it does not suppress women's capabilities and it does not hinder their growth.

2.6.Barriers for Women Career Advancement.

In today's competitive landscape of global business many talented women are pursuing their career in managerial and leadership positions, however the existence of various intangible barriers and prejudice practices are major obstacles in women's career advancement (Mordi et al. 2010). In general, barriers are factors or issues that hinders, block or control access to individuals for achieving any progress.

Career advancement for women is much more difficult compared to men as they face barriers to progression which are less likely to face by their male counterparts. (Saadin et al. 2016). There are many influencing factors such as prejudices, family responsibility, child care, domestic responsibility, organizational demand and many more. Many employed women experience the conflict between work and family roles (Saadin et al. 2016). According to Lewis and Cooper (1988) large number of working women face difficulties to meet the role of wife, mother and worker simultaneously. Women often face dilemmas weather to consider upward mobility in their career or to maintain family stability. In a study conducted between women middle management one of the reason to turn down promotion was due to family responsibility and denial to relocate (Crawford 1977). Some of the existing barriers that has continuously hindered women career advancement are explained more in in depth below.

2.6.1. Glass Ceiling

There are certain challenges that hinder the performance of women in organizations and glass ceiling is one of such issues. Female employees face difficulties to climb the corporate ladder despite competent qualifications, various experiences and achievements (Sahoo & Lenka 2016: 311). Van der Boon (2003) states “glass ceiling” as one of the crucial determinants that impacts women’s career internationally. He defines glass ceiling as all the frustration of working women who see where they want to be but who find themselves blocked by various barriers. Similarly, Morrison et al. (1990) defines glass ceiling as an obstacle that stops women to rise above a certain level in corporations. According to International Labor Organization (1997) gender stereotypes, cultural biases, organizational barriers and attitudes towards women (neglected as the primary income earner) are major factors that create a glass ceiling for women’s career advancement.

Historically, there has always been a perception that women are suitable for specific roles such as caregiver and homemaker and men are responsible for performing office work and earning. Therefore, this division of gender roles frees men from domestic responsible and creates more pressure on women. Based on the study conducted by Williams & Cooper (2004) women perform 65-85 percent of childcare work and more than 75 percent of the elderly care work. The amount of pressure that women face in balancing work and family is one of the significant barriers to their career advancement (Miller 2004). Furthermore, in most of the Asian countries including Malaysia and in the Middle East working women face greater challenges due to the sex role traditionalism and marital expectations (Bank & Vinnicome 1995).

Several scholars have justified close assessment of glass ceiling for various reasons. First, glass ceilings are problematic from an organizational effectiveness viewpoint. It is a bias human resource practice from viewpoint of employees to limit the talent pool for promotions into managerial and top levels on the basis of a personal trait such as candidate gender. Organizations practicing this artificial restriction on talent are more likely to demonstrate poorer performance at attracting and retaining talent than organizations that exhibit fair treatment of all their human resources (Powell 2000).

Second, Greenberg (1990) states that glass ceilings are tough from an organizational justice perspective. According to him organizational justice theories propose that all the talent pools are entitled with procedural and distributive justice. The former is concerned about the decision made for the personnel are fair. It is unreasonable for women as a group to be considered as their disadvantage to have their association in this group. While the latter deals with the outcome derived from those decisions about them are fair. It is unjust for women as a group to be restricted for managerial advancement only because of their membership in that group.

Third, glass ceilings are challenging from an organizational impression management view. It is crucial for any organizations to be clear and transparent in their procedures, personnel and outcomes. Fairness in return influences the attraction and retention of valuable employees which contributes for smooth operation of organizations (Ambar & Barrow 1996). To conclude glass ceiling and the factors creating glass ceiling are the major barriers that stops women to achieve the top management and leadership positions. This does not only impact on women's career advancement but also hinders organizational effectiveness.

2.6.2. Gender Stereotype

In a simple word gender stereotype means role fixation associated with different genders. Gender roles are set of norms prescribing certain qualities and activities which are appropriate for men and women. Gender stereotyping of managerial role takes place when the qualities considered to be essential to execute the role are ascribed to one sex (Schein 2001). According to Heilman and Eagly (2008) characteristics such as ability to delegate, achievement orientation and the capacity to take strategic decisions are commonly attributed to men. These traits are believed to be necessary to fulfil gender-typed as male, for instance management and leadership roles. In contrast, qualities such as relationship orientation, affiliation and nutrients are typically ascribed to women and historically these attributes have not been linked with leadership roles. There is a difference in the perception of viewing a women and male counterpart at work place (Pichler et al. 2008).

Research over few decades has revealed that management is strongly linked with male gender, type and believes those males are more likely to have the essential personality to accomplish managerial success (Schein 2001: 675-688). Gender stereotypical attitudes has resulted “think- manager- think male” phenomenon. This view worked against women and has a significant influence in females seeking to enter and advance into managerial positions (Schein 2001). Additionally, gender stereotyping of managerial position cultivates biases against female during selection, promotions, training and placements. Recently; gender stereotyping has been the root cause of discriminatory treatment of women in a work environment, which hinders women’s upward mobility (Heilman 2001).

2.6.3. Family Consideration

Considering difficulty in maintaining a work-life balance, marriage is strongly related with a low level of participation in workforce by women (Worlds Bank Group 2012). The workforce sees less amount of participation by married women due to their engagements in house-hold chores like taking care of their children, maintaining the house. Apart from house hold chores, the lack of facilities such as day care centers or nurseries and relatively a smaller number of school time hours, holds women back from return to work. Women with top leadership positions such as women managers with families meet more challenges regarding work-life balance, they find it hard to balance work life with family responsibilities. The reason behind abundant responsibility on mother is due to the thought of associating the responsibility of childcare with mother, men usually are not associated with the responsibility of childcare. (Amaratunga et al. 2008)

According to a survey conducted by TalentCorp and ACCA in 2013, the reason behind Malaysian women exiting work was attributed to family responsibilities due to the availability of limited options for working mothers to consider for childcare. Moreover, sky-high cost of babysitters/maids and daycare centers, rigid working hours and lack of support from organization played an important role to quit their jobs. According to Abdullah et al. (2008), in Asian countries, women are associated with having a strong

commitment in terms of family responsibilities. The clash between the roles from work and in family creates stress.

According to Sepehri et al. (2010), most of the times, women are faced with hindrance in promotion opportunities while trying to maintain a work life balance. While trying to maintain a balance between work life and family commitments, conflict arises between women's working role and her expected role of family's caretaker. (Subramaniam et al., 2013).

Mallon and Casell's study (1999) asserts the long working hour requirement in a job makes women's promotion difficult in some industries. Moreover, the opportunity being presented for a promotion might not be worth it, since women have to sacrifice the family time. According to Williams et al. (2012), after maternity leave, many women find it difficult to focus on their work. Unless the organization offers new mothers a good childcare support, the women have to worry for their child's proper care, and they lack working with single mindedness.

2.6.4. Work-life balance

Work-life balance signifies non-appearance of any kind of conflict between work and other personal life demands (Greenblatt 2002: 179). Similarly, Clark (2000:751) defines work-life balance as the good level of satisfaction at work and home with less role conflicts. In simple terms, it is the ability of individuals to successfully pursue work and household responsibilities. The balance is best achieved when there is harmony in work and life domains (Emslie & Hunt, 2009).

In recent years, work-life balance issues have come to the forefront of discussion, as it has been crucial to both corporations and employees. Gornick and Meyers 2005 asserts work-life balance as a key element for improving employee's productivity which positively influences overall organization performance. On the contrary, lack of work-life balance can have negative outcome such as stress, anxiety, harmful effects on emotional and physical well-being, family and marital tensions (Sparks et al., 2001; Lewis et al.2007).

Increasing women participation in workforce is creating numerous challenges and managing work and family responsibilities is the most significant one (Shelton 2006; Welter 2006; Noor 2004). Creating a balance between job and family responsibility is more difficult for women than for men due to the uneven distribution of domestic responsibilities. Thus, this becomes major barriers in women career progression and advancement (Cross & Linehan, 2006).

Though organizations have recognized importance of having female talents and male hiererchical attitudes have declined, working atmosphere is still less favourable for women at leadership positions (Kannan 2009; Naithani 2010). According to TalentCorp and ACCA (2013) 43% of Malaysian female leave their work permanently due to difficulty in maintaining work-life balance. Work issues that women executives face includes long working hours which obstructs family time. The stress and struggle to accomplish work-life balance forces women to settle for less demanding positions or to leave the job.

2.6.5. Organizational Structure and Culture

Scholars have defined organizational culture as shared belief system within an organization (Spender 1996), collective understanding (Van Maanen & Barley 1984), widely shared core values and the pattern of basic assumptions within an organization (Schein 2004). Many researchers have asserted that there exists connection between organizational practice and norms with the managerial roles (Sepheri et al. 2010). O'Neil et al. (2008) urges three main reasons regarding why organizational structure, culture and system are still in traditional masculine form and how gender and traditional male model is increasing the gender gap in leadership roles.

Firstly, the current organizational structure is suitable for those who are in top management position and majority of them are men. So, there is no persuasive force or rationale that urge change in the system and the status quo works perfectly for those concerned. Additionally, second generation gender bias remains in less visible form of prejudice. Second generation gender biases are the work policies and culture that seems that seems to be impartial and natural but in real they are male dominated principles and

moralities that controls traditional work environment. Gender biased dynamics occurs in organizational policies and have direct impact on hiring decisions and promotions (O'Neil et al. 2008.)

Secondly, women who are capable to move upwards in the organizational hierarchy faces multiple life roles simultaneously and administrative rules and practises are non-supportive. As a result, they not only lack self-confident but also choose to “opt out” or “off ramp” from their professional life. (Belkin 2003, Hewlett 2007). When the cost of rising to top position is much higher in regard to family and personal life women tend to settle for lower level jobs or to leave.

Finally, even organizational structure and system may modify but organizational culture and individual mind-sets lag behind. In the study “think manager, think men” from 1970s to the 2000s exhibited men's attribute about women being unsuitable to perform leadership roles (Schein 1976: 2007). Burkes et. al (2008: 279) emphasizes that the major huddle for women's career development are the attitude, behaviour and perceptions of their male colleagues. Figure 4 shows the organizational structure based on traditional masculine form and how it has impacted women.

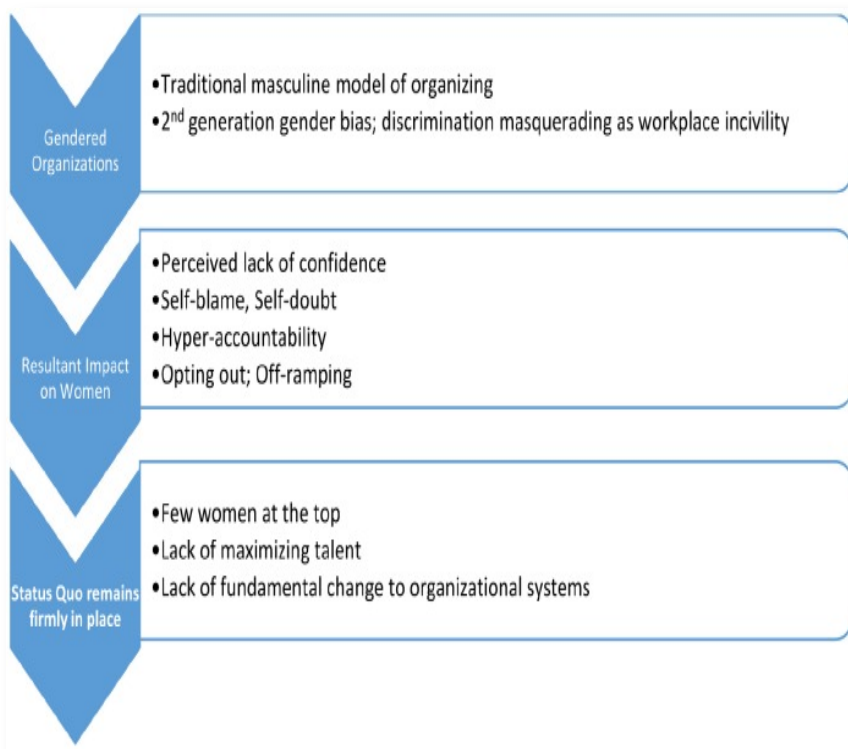


Figure 4. The impact of gendered organizational systems on women's career advancement. (O'Neil et al.2008)

2.6.6. Occupational Barriers

Male-dominated occupations are those that consist 25 % or less women (Catalyst 2017). When women step into what are termed traditional male occupations, they often face various difficulties and challenges. In male dominated occupations men have more resources and definitional power. Therefore, this can influence promotional and development opportunities for women working in male dominated field. (Damaske 2011). Many jobs are perceived as gendered, that is either male or female can perform the specific given task (Burke & Vinnicombe 2005). Hence, recruiting decisions are somehow based on if the job is more suitable for men or women (Heilman 1983; Jawahar & Mattsson 2005). Kotter and Agars (2005) addressed that stereotypes about job is

favorable for women's career advancement. However, it creates negative effects on women who want to pursue male sex-type jobs (e.g. construction, aviation).

Construction industry in most of the countries are correlated with male domination. It is often described by physical capabilities, strength, tough and ability to perform in harsh outdoor working environment (Gale 1994). Women confronts several forms of discriminations in greater extent in male dominated industries. Men tends to demonstrate their macho style language and behavior easily which often leads to conflict and argument. Dainty et al. (2000) believes that women are left with two choices if they want to work in male dominated construction industry: either to behave like men or to decrease their level of expectation, goals and accept any secondary positions (clerical staffs). Bagilhole et al. (2000) assures that it is particularly very challenging for women to reach leadership positions due to male's intentional social isolation and devalue women's contributions to uphold their won position. In a study conducted by Lingard and Francis (2005) regarding work-life conflicts of male and female engineers in Australia found that female engineers had difficulties in balancing work-life. As, construction conditions required long hours of work and labor, women had to fulfill household, family responsibilities resulted in higher turnover rates compare to male engineers.

The aviation industry culture is influence by typically male with masculine norms and values. Neal-Smith and Cockburn (2009) addressed issues faced by female working in aviation industry in U.K. Female pilot suffered from sexual harassment which includes sexist jokes, derogatory comments and aggressive behavior from male colleague. Additionally, what male management and colleague believe are very peculiar to women pilots. The various kinds of assumption regarding female pilots flying ability and their career aspiration affects their working life and relationship with their colleagues (Smith & Cockburn 2009: 33). A study about women army discovered that women face less prejudice and easily acceptable in male sex-type jobs if they had history of pursuing so called typical masculine jobs. Consequently, the chances of women being competent in male- dominated fields is determined by her previous gender atypical job. (Hareli et al. 2008.)

In a study conducted by Ibáñez (2016 :39) concludes that career types and barriers related to them are basically the consequences of the type of companies' women work for. The challenges faced by women differ based on each working situation. Women working in family business got easy access to trade network and building relationship. Similarly, small business owners and self-employed women working in decorative painting in private houses received extremely favourable conditions, since women themselves organize their time and activities. Working for themselves also minimises those obstacles related with prejudices. Corporations in the construction industry also supports women's career advancement due to the government regulations and formalised labour relationship and strong union. (Ibáñez 2016 :47.)

2.7.Overcoming Barriers

In order for women to reach and retain in the male dominated corporate leadership roles they must first prepare themselves to battle the individual barriers. Those barriers that are directly or indirectly related to their personal level. In the review of literature family consideration and work-life balance has been identified as personal obstacles that hindered women career advancement. Moreover, women profoundly encounter various situational centred barriers such as gender stereotype, glass ceiling and organizational structure and culture that makes their professional journey more complicated. In spite of that, women are trying and being able to manoeuvre these barriers. Ample of literature has addressed these issues but there are very few that focused on identifying the strategies to overcome such barriers effectively.

In one of the study conducted by Villadsen & Tack (1986) 20 female executives with at least one child under 18 were interviewed to identify their balancing strategy for work and family life. Research identified that, these women leaders attentively arranged their family duties and work. They set a clear boundary between home and work. Similarly, in the research conducted by Haddon & Hede (2009) among lawyers in Australia discovered boundary management as one of the effective strategy for coping up with work and family roles. These participants made conscious decision to separate work and non-work time, and not to take work home or to work over weekends. This helped them to focus and be more involved and interactive with family members.

Betts (2011) states that it is very crucial for women to become a strong negotiator and their own advocates to advance in their career. Women should overcome their fears of negotiating and implement their strategy of being creative during the negotiating process in terms of their career mobility, needs and flexibility. Additionally, Sarfaty et al. (2007) also asserts that women being prepared in advance for any kind of negotiation would increase the greater self-confidence to advocate their needs. Greater emphasis on negotiation skill is requisite for managing a career especially for women.

Increasing rate of female labour participation is a direct result of them having time and opportunity. When time-cost of unpaid work is reduced women become more compatible with market work (International Labour Organization, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that more women are being single, divorced and a childless thriving to pursuit higher career goals. (Tower & Alkadry 2008). Childless women are more likely to participate in the labour market as this provide them chance to invest in their career rather than involve in household responsibilities (Goldin & Katz 2002; Tocchioni 2018).

Esser et al. (2018) study on female leadership competencies discovered that, success of female leaders working in the male dominated industry was not solely based on their professional expertise but on amalgamation of their professional and interpersonal behaviours. The former point of view emphasis on women leader's authenticity. In the context of leadership, authentic leaders are considered to remain true to what feels natural to them and being themselves, even if their behaviour has to be modified in accordance to changing circumstances. (Goffee & Jones 2015). The later refers to women leader's skills to demonstrate their natural feminine character yet being able adopt to masculine behaviours such as power awareness, networking and determination. (Esser et al. 2018.)

To conclude, all the personal, organizational and social huddles and barriers that constraint women and their advancement to leadership roles can only be overcome when women are able to demonstrate their core competencies. In order to do so women have empowered themselves through attending higher degree education (Abdullah 2008; Sundaram et al.2014; Obers 2014;), adopting the strategies and practices such as finding

a mentor, building professional and personal network (Abalkhail & Allan 2015; Khalid et al. 2017) and enriching their status as well as legitimacy of women as leaders.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

According to Tooraco (2005) researchers are expected to explain the overall process of how the research was conducted. This chapters aims to provide the methodological framework which in detail explains how all the research related information's were gathered, how it was analyzed, synthesized and reported. The sub chapters in this study includes the research design, research approach, research methods, data collections technique, data analysis and lastly reliability and validity of the study.

3.1. Research Design

Research design is the comprehensive strategy adopted by the researcher in order to combine the various components of the study in a coherent and logical way. Research problem determines the formation of research design; therefore, it is important to effectively address the research problem at the initial stage of the study. (Vaus & Vaus 2001.) In general, research design entails how the preliminary research question and research objective will be achieved. It explains the data collections methods, data analyzing process and ethical issues taken into consideration throughout the research process. (Saunders et al. 2016: 163). The Research Onion in figure 4 illustrates the process of research design.

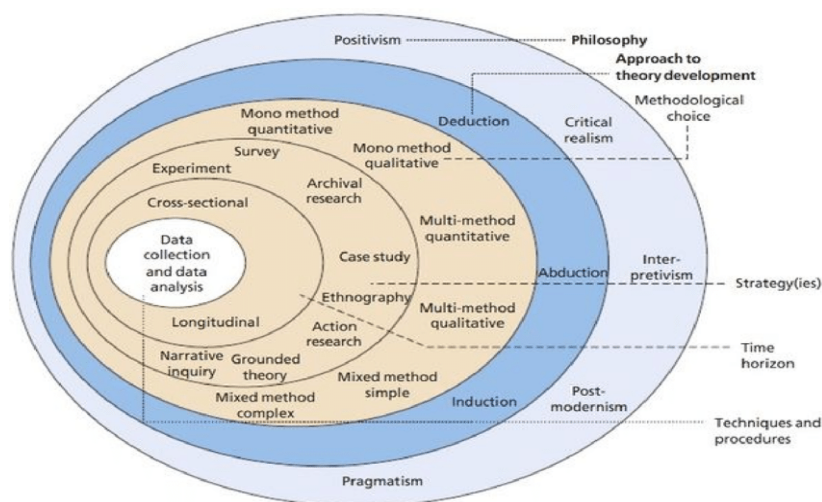


Figure 5. Research onion (Saunders et al. 2016)

3.2. Research Approach

Business research is basically based on induction and deduction approach. In induction approach data is the initial source of knowledge; researcher collects data to explore a phenomenon to produce theory. Researcher does not rely on any conceptual framework or theory to avoid bias data collection (Mayor et al. 2016: 111). In contrast, deduction approach provides a systematic process for testing a theory. Researcher proceeds with theory often developed from academic literature, design research strategy and test the theory. (Saunders et al. 2016: 145.)

Table 1. Major differences between induction and deduction approach (Saunders et al. 2016: 145)

Induction	Deduction
-Broad generalization from specific observation	-Starts from general to reach specific, logical conclusion
-Theory building	-Theory verification or testing
-Conclusions are drawn from data	-Based on theory to predict conclusion
-Collection of quantitative data	-Collection of qualitative data
-Researcher is a part of research process	-Researcher is independent of what is being researched

Likewise, Abduction is the combination of both inductive and deductive approach. Researcher gathers data to investigate a phenomenon, identify patterns, discover new or alter existing framework and examines it through additional data collection. Basically, empirical finding and theoretical framework are combined to obtain a result in abduction approach (Saunders et al. 2016: 145.) This particular study has reviewed all the possible existing literature on the related topic which guides towards answering research objective and questions. The existing theories will be tested with the empirical findings. Therefore, the research approach used in this study is deductive.

3.3. Research Purpose and Research Methods

The purpose of research design can either be explanatory, descriptive, exploratory or combination of these. If the main focus of research is to explain the relationship between variables or to understand the reason behind the cause of certain phenomena than the research purpose is explanatory in nature. (Saunders et al. 2016: 176). Descriptive research emphasis on understanding an accurate profile about a person or certain situation. According to Robson (2002: 59), exploratory research is conducted to understand new insights and to find out what is happening about a topic that is being studied. Furthermore, research questions in exploratory research begins with “What” or “How”. (Saunders et al. 2016: 176). The main objective of this paper is to find out how Malaysian women traverse an upward journey to leadership positions. It aims to identify various obstacles that women encounter during their leadership journey and to understand the strategies adopted by women to reach and remain in the leadership positions. Therefore, research purpose of this thesis is exploratory.

Quantitative methods and qualitative methods are the two main methods used in business research. (Saunders et al. 2016: 165). Collecting and analysing data using quantitative research requires statistical and descriptive knowledge. The data and results are visually represented either in form of graphs, plots, charts and tables. (Saunders et al. 2016: 165). Studies using quantitative analysis often draws the results and conclusions from logic and evidence. The interpretation of raw data in quantitative research is guided by the general rules in order to access and evaluate validity of the instrument. On the other hand, in

qualitative research the subjectivity of research is very important. The research tries to know the subject in order to understand the phenomena. This kind of research is often conducted in a natural setting. According to Creswell (2009) in qualitative research, data are collected by asking broad or general questions, researcher relies on the views, ideas and opinion of the respondents, analyses and report participants words in unbiased manner. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, qualitative method is more suitable to best answer the research question.

3.4. Research Strategy

There are several strategies (such as experiments, surveys, history, archival analysis and case) that can be implemented to conduct a social science research (Yin 2009:8) In this thesis case study is used as a research strategy. According to Robson (2002: 178), case study is a tactic for undertaking research which includes an empirical enquiry of specific existing phenomenon in its real-life situation exercising several bases of confirmation.

Yin (2009:8) suggests that case study as a research strategy can be used depending on the form of preliminary research question of the study. When the researcher tries to answer 'how' and 'why' question and to answer those questions if researcher also focuses on contemporary events than case study is most suitable method. The research question of this thesis is in 'how' form and this study also examines the contemporary events occurred in Malaysian women's leadership journey. Therefore, case study is most suitable form of strategy for this research.

The four different types of designs for case studies includes (1) single-case holistic designs (2) single-case embedded designs, (3) multiple-case holistic designs and (4) multiple-case embedded designs (Yin 2009:46). There are several rationales in implementing these various case study designs. Researchers use single-case design if the study is extreme or unique, the phenomenon being studied is so rare that any single case is worth analysing and documenting. While, multiple-case designs allow researcher to conduct multiple experiments that results replications and some contradictions. Therefore, multiple-case is considered to provide more improved robustness to the result. (Yin 2009:53.) This thesis uses multiple-case holistic design as it is most suitable for

answering the research question. Thus, several individual women's leadership journey is examined and each case is analysed with holistic approach.

3.5.Data Collection Techniques

In order to answer the preliminary research question and objective both primary and secondary data were collected in this study. Firstly, the source of secondary data was the existing literature extracted from books, journals and articles. Various statistics and reports published by government agencies and international organizations were also analysed to further report regarding women and leadership in Malaysia context. Since this study is qualitative and associated with interpretive philosophy, researcher need to construct meanings from respondent opinions and experience about the subject. (Saunders et al. 2016: 168). Interview was chosen as the primary source of data collection because they can provide in depth contextual information which is essential for an explorative study.

Saunders et al. (2016: 388) defines research interview as, a meaningful interaction among two or more people, demanding the interviewer to create connection and ask brief and clear questions, to which the interviewee is keen to answer and also to listen carefully. Attentively, conducted research interview can assist researcher to collect valid and reliable data. It is also important to consider the nature of interview which facilitates researcher to fulfil the research objective and to answer research question. There are three different kind of interviews mostly used in business research; structured interviews, semi-structured interviews and unstructured interviews. In structured interviews, questionnaires which are standardized with pre-coded answer are used whereas unstructured interviews ask open ended questions which allows interviewee to freely express their perception regarding the topic. Semi-structured interviews usually referred to as qualitative research interviews are non-standardized. In this kind of interviews; researcher use list of themes and some key issues. Interview questions may vary depending on the flow of interaction, additional prompt questions may be required based on each interview to meet the research goal. (Saunders et al. 2016: 391.)

In order to collect the primary data semi-structured questionnaire was designed for this research. The interviewees were chosen from previous connection and through some common friends. Respondents were mainly middle-level and senior-level Malaysian female managers working in different field with different years of work experience. Out of seven interviews 4 interviews were conducted via Skype and the remaining three were sent through email. All the Skype interviews which lasted for about an hour. Some of the emails were followed up later to better understand respondent's opinion and ideas. The medium of language used was English.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

In order to measure the quality of any quantitative research reliability and validity are used as a main term. There is ongoing discussion regarding how the quality of qualitative research should be evaluated as the qualitative research consist interpretive assumptions. The key aspect to ensure the quality is by authentically representing findings and by unbiased interpretations. Additionally, the whole research process which includes reviewing literature, data collection and data analysis should be fair and transparent. (Saunders et al. 2016: 202.)

3.6.1. Validity

Validity refers to the accuracy of the research conducted; if the research findings and results are truly about what they appear to be, whether the relationship between the variables truly exists. Validity in qualitative research means "appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data. (Mayor & Blackmoon 2005: 158; Saunders et al. 2016: 202). Internal validity and external validity are the two different forms of measuring the research quality.

Internal validity shows if the relationship between two variables are accurately demonstrated. It can be applied to explanatory studies to statically show what has contributed to certain outcome between variables. Researcher seeks to improve internal validity by using analytical technics for analysing data such as using logic model (Yin 2009: 43).

External validity refers to the extent to which the finding of study be generalized (Saunders et al. 2016: 204). This means if the study was replicated would the results be same for another researcher. This research explores the issues faced and strategies adopted by women to reach leadership positions in Malaysian context. Therefore, the generalisability of this study lies in the assumption that the finding from this research can be applicable for those countries with similar context and similar women status.

3.6.2. Reliability

Reliability refers to “replication and consistency”. Meaning if the similar research design is applied by another researcher and is able generates consistent finding then the research would be seen as reliable. Furthermore, to ensure consistency it requires researcher to carefully conduct and analyse interviews, observation and data collections techniques. (Saunders et al. 2016: 202.) So, to strengthened the reliability of study any kind of error or bias should be avoided.

Possible threats to reliability in qualitative research are participant error, participant bias, researcher error and researcher bias. To eliminate participant error of this study, all the participants were sent an email informing what the research was all about, why was it conducted and also the interview questions were sent one week prior actual interview. This was done to help interviewee to familiarize, prepare and be comfortable during the interview process. Also, the suitable time for interview and preferred methods of communication was selected based on the participants choice. Additionally, to avoid participants bias full anonymity was granted, they were able to speak up their opinions without fear of recognition. In order to do so, their affiliated organizations name was not discussed.

On the other hand, to eliminate researcher error and to prepare for actual interview pilot interviews were collected face to face with some of the respondents one year ago in Malaysia. This facilitated to make amendments in the actual interview questions and also help to generate the popup questions during interviews. To avoid the researcher bias participants were requested to clarify whatever they had said, respondents were also sent

follow up emails to eliminated any kind of misinterpretation that may occur during the data analysis process. Lastly, all the information, ideas and opinions that were gathered during this entire research process were analysed and reported even if they were contradicting to the literatures.

3.7.Data Analysis

According to Yin (2009:126) data analysis comprises of inspecting, classifying, arranging, testing or otherwise recombining evidence, to draw empirically constructed result. Primary data for this thesis was collected through eight different interviews. The primary data is qualitative in nature, which means it does not focus on any statistics or number; rather it is socially constructed and the meanings are derived based on viewpoints and opinion delivered by the interviews respondents. In order to avoid any kind of misinterpretation all the skype interviews were audio recorded and were transcribed immediately after the interviews were over. It is also essential to focus on how the interviewee responds; all the non-verbal communication to generate meaningful results (Saunders et al. 2012: 550). Additionally, important points were jot down during the time of interviews; to further focus on those topics. All the questionnaire that were answered by the respondents were read within the next 24 hours and follow up emails were send for further justifications and elaboration. Therefore, collected interviews were evaluated and analysed using words and observations.

As suggested by Powell & Renner (2003) all the collected data needs proper analysis, interpretation, discipline and a systematic approach in order to deliver genuine results. Data analysis process depends on research question that you want to answer and the resources that you have gathered to draw conclusion.

According to Quinlan (2011:422) four different stages can be followed to systematically analyse the collected data. The very first stage is known as descriptive analysis, the key element in this stage is to understand what is there in the data. The second phase is interpretive phase, where the researcher tries to understand, interpret and articulate the meaning of the data. In the third stage, researcher generates minor conclusion from the collected data. Moreover, researcher draws the possible meaning and tease out the

different areas of implications. The final stage of data analysis is theorization. In this stage, researcher reviews the initial theoretical framework presented in the literature review chapter. Then, researcher examines the literature review to figure out if the findings of the study fit with or contradicts the findings of study. This is how researcher provides their contribution to the body of knowledge. (Quinlan 2011:422.) The final stage of data analysis will be discussed more in detail in the next chapter of this study; empirical findings and analysis. Figure 6 summarizes the four different stages of systematic data analysis.

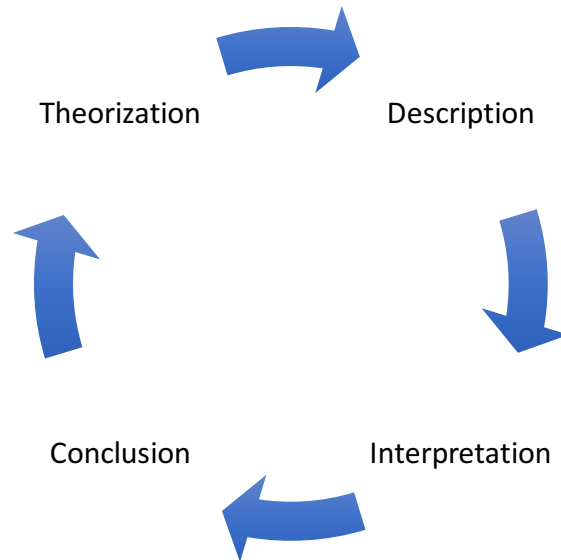


Figure 6. Stages of Data Analysis (Quinlan 2011: 422).

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to report the finding that this study has discovered. Moreover, in this chapter researcher aims to answer the preliminary research question which is: *How Malaysian women traverse an upward journey to leadership positions*. In order to answer the research question and preliminary research objective; a total of 7 interviews were conducted with middle and senior level female managers from different professional background in Malaysia,

This chapter presents the straightforward opinions provided by the respondents during the interview. Due to the time zone difference and busy schedule of the respondents, the skype interviews did not last more than an hour. Whereas, some respondents took 3-4 weeks to reply the questionnaire send via emails. So, repeated reminders and follow up message were send to them. All the participants were assured regarding their rights of privacy and confidentiality. Therefore, no specific names were mentioned, they were labelled as respondent A, respondent B and so on. Since there was no any objection from the respondents; the whole interview was conducted in English even though the official language of Malaysia is Bahasa Malayu.

In the first section interviewees were asked about the general question about themselves, who they are and what they do. It was a warm up secession to make them feel comfortable. The second section of interview focused on direct questions concerning about the research topic and the objective. (*see appendix 1. For the interview manual*). The three main focus areas of the interviews were 1. Enabling supportive factors (personal and organizational) 2. challenge or difficulties faced during professional journey 3. Measures taken to overcome challenges to reach and retain in the leadership position.

4.1. Background of Respondents

The respondent comprises of females who were all engaged in professional work. The ages of the respondent ranges between 29-45. Out of the 7 respondents 3 were married and the other 3 were single and the other respondent was a divorcee. During their leisure time, most of the married ones where engaged with their kids and taking care of their family. While the single ones were taking some training courses and engaged in volunteering activities. Those engaged with financial market were taking up courses to complete their certifications, which adds value to their current professions. Respondents who were involved in academia where involved in writing papers and at the same time performing their professional duties. Those involved in service sector and business were doing their best to get involve in social activities and take part in volunteering events to show their corporate social responsibilities. Table 2 provides the background information about respondents.

Table 2. Background of respondents

Respondents	Age	Marital Status	Profession
A	34	Single	Program Coordinator
B	29	Single	Branch Manager, Bank
C	35	Married	Regional Marketing Head
D	38	Married	Financial Analyst
E	45	Divorced	Head of Department
F	32	Married	Logistic Coordinator
G	35	Single	Service Manager

4.2. Enabling Supportive Factor

In order to understand what made Malaysian women career advancement more possible or easier, the interviewees were asked to express their opinion on enabling supportive factor obtained from personal and organizational level. In this context, enabling supportive factors are forces that facilitate women directly or indirectly to reach the positions which they hold now. First, those factors that are directly related to respondents will be analyzed, in addition to that respondent's personal traits and related behavior that inclined their success will be presented very briefly and followed by the support received from organization will be discussed at last.

4.2.1. Personal Level

Three respondents indicated that updating oneself was very crucial in the ever-changing landscape of global business. According to them, they were proactive in taking up courses and trainings related to the particular field. This enhanced their capabilities and competencies. Respondent A and F had this to say:

“Continuous updating oneself through training and development, such as attending related trainings that would increase the knowledge, skills and abilities that is required for the job”.

“Trainings that I did 5 years ago is less effective now, things have changed the way we do business has changed so I had to be updated myself in all possible ways”

According to respondent B, there were many factors that had facilitated career boost, most important factor was *“to be prepared for a job”*. Respondent believed that in order to be prepared for a job, at the initial stage of professional career, academic credentials are very crucial. This allows to prepare women to enter the job market with confidence. The respondent further emphasized about the job learning, she claimed that;

“even as a branch manager I go through scenario on a day to day basis, there is something new every day. I have to constantly learn and keep updated with the policies, rules and regulations set by the government and cater to our clients, this is what I have been doing since I started and it is never ending”.

Respondent D shared, her families and friends stimulated desire to achieve something big in life. Respondent family environment molded behaviors and provided positive attitude in order to do things which was unexpected from women. Participant further added when your family members and close friends are talking part in leadership roles you tend to believe that it is doable, it is very inspiring. This encouraged respondent D to participate in the financial industry despite it is male dominated.

The respondent D stated;

“Growing up I didn’t see many women leaders, even in my household my mother was housewife for the longest time, 12 years ago she started her own business and she now runs it, I did not see female taking leadership roles until the later stage of my life. When you have never seen something happen, you don’t even think about possibility of its existence”

Likewise, respondent C disclosed that family support was key for career success. She expressed her happiness and admitted that she is bestowed with understanding family members and support from her husband made it so easy for her to focus on what she loves to do. The Respondent also indicated that, having someone who is so supportive and flexible has encouraged and convinced her anything was possible. The respondent had this to say;

“When I was offered my dream job, I had kids and other family responsibility. That point was the culmination of my career. For me it was an opportunity to expand and learn. At that stage, my husband took care of our kids and supported me to pursue my dreams. I believe family support, especially support from your spouse is one of the most essential tool for professional growth for women”.

A summary of the enabling supportive factor (personal level) is presented in the table 3.

Table 3. Enabling Supportive Factors (Personal Level)

Respondents	Enabling Supportive Factors (Personal level)
A, F	Updating oneself, attending related trainings
B	To be prepared for a job, job learning
C	Family / spouse support
D	Surroundings, Friends, Family, Environment where you grow up

4.2.2. Traits and related Behaviors

As stated in the literature review, persons traits and related behaviours can highly influence women career success and advancement (Bilimoria et al. 2007). Likewise, throughout the interview process the researcher observed that all the seven respondents unveiled different kinds of traits and related actions which they performed; somehow exhibited as an aid to their career success as a leader.

Respondents had exhibited some attributes such as being ambitious and passionate were developed since early childhood. Being ambitious represents that these women had thrive for achieving high goals and had a vision. Respondents were using their unique abilities and talent to get into the right track in their career. Respondents revealed that they were solution oriented, pro-proactive. They talked to people who are already in the corporate

world and tried to get advice on various career related issues. This shows that they knew where they wanted to do in their life.

Additionally, participants shared that they were self-motivate and hardworking because they already had a hint that for women to get in the leadership roles or even in the labour market it was an extra work and effort. Participants shared they were working overtime to get the things done as it was important for them to outperform to remain and to be visible in the organizations. participants had to put extra effort to create added value to their performance in order to do so they complete their higher studies and get the desired promotions. Table 4 shows respondent's traits and related behaviour demonstrated by them.

Table 4. Traits and related behaviour

Traits	Related Actions/ Behaviours
Ambitious	<p>“Talking to people who are already in the positions and gaining valuable advice on how to reach the desired position” (Respondent A)</p> <p>“I have always dreamt big. Even when I was a trainee I used to envision myself as a manager” (Respondent G)</p>
Perseverance	<p>“I knew it was difficult to drive each individual focus towards long term organizational goal. I worked to reaffirm each individual and each departments effort” (Respondent C).</p>

Self-motivated	“I knew no one else was going to do it for me. I had to be my motivator. I got education, I did not settle for less. I always wanted to achieve above and beyond expectation” (Respondent E).
Passionate	“I am always passionate about what I do and I do my best” (Respondent)
Hard work	“All I wanted was to be successful, hence, I would work overtime (without overtime pay) to complete the work and to prepare in advance (Respondent F)

4.3. Organizational Level

Many companies have begun to prioritize women’s empowerment. Empowering women and fully leveraging their skills, abilities and leadership in every aspect of business is vital to maximize companies’ competitiveness. Organizations play a crucial role in creating a favourable environment that facilitates women to increase their potential in order to be prepared for any kind of challenges. Therefore, the researcher tries to understand what kind of organizational treatment helped women’s career advancement.

All of seven respondents admitted that supportive work environment plays a significant role for employee’s career development. The experiences and opinion shared by five of the respondents summarizes what had been said by the rest. When asked ‘how has your company supported your career advancement’, this is what the respondent B had to say;

“My company (Bank) has supported a lot in terms of education aspects. Financial assistance is provided to do the courses and certifications (required in banking field). We

also have the internal support system from the HR, to voice our concerns. Bank takes in to consideration the importance of work life balance, therefore provides some membership programs... it also encourages to take part in many volunteer events that prosper community”

The respondent further acknowledged that if company wants its employees to invest their time and effort and be motivated to serve company as an active member, company has to invest in them. Respondent explained that it helps a lot when the company you work for take cares of your growth and development. When companies provide employees with financial aid to do courses and training it facilitate employees and lessen their burden. It becomes responsibility of company to provide aid to their employees as they are going to invest their knowledge in your company.

Potential and talented employees are seeking for companies that will let them to learn, grow and develop as an individual. If companies are seeking for their market expansion and revenue growth in a same way employees are seeking for their career advancement. Therefore, it is a win-win situation for both parties.

Interviewee A stated that company has facilitated career development by providing opportunity to enrol for training and development courses, which according to the interviewee was crucial in order to advance and update herself. The respondent expressed great satisfaction about the positive consequences of training and development that aid for promotion. Respondent revealed that;

“Within the seven years of my career, I was promoted four times, from lecturer 1 to lecturer 2 to senior lecturer to programme coordinator. My promotion within the department was considered quite rapid”

Respondent E elaborated on the effectiveness of company’s culture, which was learning and development oriented. It was determined to help its employees to understand and identify their strength, weakness and interest. Therefore, employees were facilitated to learn and develop their area of interest that was not necessarily related to their current

job. Company's emphasis on employee's development does not only help to retain talent pool but also facilitates them to prepare for any kind of changes that volatile global market may demand. The respondent noted that;

“These days there are multiple opportunities for growth but only those who has prioritize their professional development over financial rewards can take full benefit of fit. At ‘XYZ’ company we are always encouraged to learn, even though that is not necessarily related to current job. I have been happily working for 5 years now”.

Respondent F who was just back from her maternity leave had this to say regarding the support provided by her company,

“for a new mother like myself, flexibility provided by an organization in all possible condition matters a lot. I am grateful that I was happily welcomed. There are many other aspects that organization should implement that favours women with children's, such as breastfeeding breaks, less working hours, right to refuse changes in working schedule and working from distance etc.”

Supportive work environment not only facilitates a new mother to resume her working life but also assist her to be mentally and emotionally strong. The journey towards motherhood is definitely not an easy one. Thus, such treatments offered by companies provides job security and increases the willingness of women to continue her job. Respondent further added, these flexibilities makes it easier to balance work-life demands. As a result, it assists women to progress.

The road to the top is difficult, its bumpy and full of huddles. For senior women who have made it, it is there responsibility to share their stories with the women coming behind. So, you can help to make the same journey that you have made as well. According to the respondent G, the mentorship program offered by their company aims to continue to build female talent pool and pipeline. Therefore, the company associates with many other universities within Malaysia to identify women at the very early stage on their career as potential talent. Respondent further elaborated on the benefits of effective mentorship;

“If we can figure out the ways to assist women to reach the best of themselves, we create a circle of success. I mentor you, you mentor someone else. If we want more women to reach and retain in the top positions, this is what exactly needs to be done. I have personally experience a lot of benefits of mentorship program and I highly encourage companies to effectively implement it”.

time

Table 5. Enabling supportive factor (Organizational level)

Respondents	Enabling Supportive Factors (Organizational Level)
A	Opportunities to enroll for trainings
B	Financial aid for courses/ complete education, HR support, membership programs (for work-life balance)
E	Learning and development oriented company’s culture, opportunities to learn areas of interest (not necessarily related to current job)
F	Flexibility for new mothers - mental/emotional support, job security
G	Effective mentorship program

4.4. Challenges

In this approach, the primary challenges faced during professional journey will be covered. There were many challenges faced by women during their professional career. Majority of respondents expressed gender discrimination, organization culture favouring men, and work-life balance as a key threat for women trying to rise to acquire leadership positions. In recent times, gender differences have been the dominant occurrences within the organizational settings. Issues of women discrimination, inferiority stereotyping have been an extensive barrier restraining women from either entry and retaining leadership and managerial positions.

4.4.1. Gender Discrimination

When asked about the difficulties faced during the professional journey, many respondents expressed their disappointment on issues pertaining to male dominations and their attitude towards female leaders. Despite of Malaysia's economic growth and rapid advancement, the stereotypical attitudes towards female leaders and their roles still exists. In male dominated organizations females had to outperform to exhibit their abilities and effectiveness. Respondent B had this to say;

“sometimes when there is a group activity going on... my male peers would not expect an answer from me.... upon presenting a right answer, I would have their silence and upon having a wrong answer they gave me a look.”

Respondent B has outlined the behaviour of her male peers, this exhibit a typical chauvinistic attitude. The respondent expressed her disdain at the attitude of the male peers as her contributions on issues discussed is welcome with a bland reaction. These kinds of dogmatic attitudes towards female workers keeps on building up in many societies around us, even the developed economies and cultures have failed to tackle this evil in bud.

“I have had clients who come in and they ask me a very generic question, when I tell them the answer they would ignore and try to override me and go over to the supervisor who is a male or even a junior male colleague to confirm simply because he is a male.”
(respondent B laments)

Respondent further added that gender discrimination extends beyond working colleagues to external customers who sometimes disregard her answers to their queries. Some clients would prefer to get their inquiries answered by a male worker albeit her skills and in-depth knowledge, simply because of her gender status. It goes without saying that clients have doubted her knowledge and expertise by dragging gender discrimination along with skills. The conventional minds of people force them to think that men are more intelligent than women and hence more experienced in her case.

This kind of behaviour exhibited by male (peers or clients) clearly indicates that, the misconception of women possessing less authoritative power to deal with challenging issues is still a canker which must be eliminated. Malaysian women have always faced more challenges and difficulties because of the cultural stigma. Generally, they were perceived to be home based and their responsibilities lies only in the confines of the house. The paradigm shift of women engaging in commercial activities, proactiveness in professional workplaces and being in keen competition with their male counterparts raises few eyebrows. There is still some misogynist who simply downplay the significant capabilities of women and simply bent sabotaging their efforts.

Respondent E expressed sadness regarding promotions. The respondent argued that, even though there are laid down principles and standards, many companies do the contrary which sometimes does not favour women. Even though companies have many qualified women, the chances for them getting promoted in higher executive positions is still less. Majority of people with stereotypical mind-set think that family life, or skills will hold a woman back from succeeding, and ultimately the company will fail to succeed under the leadership because a woman is not as brilliant as her male colleague. The respondent voiced out;

“I worked for 3 years in a company, when it was time for promotion my opposite sex colleague with less qualification and experienced were promoted”.

The respondent further revealed that some of the biases within organization settings were based on nepotism. A typical scenario the respondent bemoaned was when a fellow colleague selected as a best fit for promotion not because of qualifications or expertise but simply due to family ties and relationship with the manager. These unfair practice goes a long way to demotivate women. The respondent alluded to the fact that, other colleagues also suffer the same fate of unfairness and favouritism within the organization. In as much as these practices sometimes traumatise the victims involved, less efforts are being effectuated to correct this incidence since some of the top executives who are supposed to know better are rather the feckless culprits

4.4.2. Organizational Culture Favouring Men

An Organization’s culture plays an important role in practising unbiased and equal treatments for everyone associated with it. If the people working in an organization are well aware of their duties and are carrying out their tasks in an impartial manner, then new-comers will also learn the same things. At the same time, if the people working in an organization are biased towards the appreciation and encouragement of only male peers and are looking down upon their female peers who works under the same roof, then everyone will follow that norm. This will eventually set a trend and that is how a culture grows, learning and observing from each other. In a nutshell, the culture plays a crucial role in the development of peers. If equality is not maintained among the genders in an organisational culture, then unprofessional attitudes will prevail. Respondent C emphasised on the different discriminative behaviours of the top executives with their subordinates. As reported by the interviewee C;

“Male colleagues received much more appreciation and support when they expressed their ideas”.

The interviewee C further added, this kind of bias behaviour practised by organizations discourages those women who work hard. Appreciation plays an essential role in uplifting

the attitudes of the employees as well as motivating them. Consequently, when someone who deserves to be appreciated is being suppressed due to utterly unprofessional act like gender differences, it results in low esteem and despair. The employees may turn their back on performing well, knowing that they will never get any appreciation for their work and will lose their drive to accomplish the goals.

Respondent D posits that women are more likely to be assigned with complicated projects when the managers already knew there are setbacks. These kinds of unfair practices demonstrated by organizations creates difficult situations for females. Respondent D revealed;

“When the ship starts sinking then female employees are brought on-board and are made to work on that failing project. At the beginning of my professional career, the number of female employees were very few. All of my female colleague realized that we were given major task that was previously assigned to our male peers. In conditions where project was difficult or unreachable we were expected to complete it and based on this, our performance, effectiveness and sometimes our characters were judge”

Respondent further added, this kind of consequences faced by women in spite of their hard work and dedication is somehow related to the Malaysian culture and upbringings. Women are always expected to say ‘Yes’, and they do what they are told to do. This is the reason they ask women to work on that unsuccessful project knowing they will not say a ‘No’ to it. In this kind of scenario where women are at initial stage of their professional career they are often obligated to work overtime in order to outperform and show their existence or else they are not even noticeable. Therefore work-life balance, family, personal happiness and wellbeing is often compromised.

Organization where senior management and subordinates have typical male dominant thinking had more inclination of assigning women employees an already deteriorating project. Most of the times, the nature of these kind of projects are ambiguous, to say the least. For instance, women are sometimes made to work in remote locations which are miles from home. The stress and difficulty alone in getting to work is exhaustive and

tiring. The climax of the challenge they faced was being evaluated based on their performance in those dying projects.

4.4.3. Work-life Balance

Interviewee A revealed that, in the initial stage of working life, time management was a major issue. Respondent focus was directed to work related issues, and this affected personal life. During peak periods work overload becomes enormous. In the event of temporal shortage of workers, the employer entrusts the respondent with uncompleted tasks. By so doing, she ends up with huge piles of extra work along with her primary tasks. Respondent A bemoans;

“At times, I would be tasked with tones of projects and assignments..., I would have to learn how to juggle my main job and the task handed to me. Anticipating the danger and stress ahead during these peak periods, some colleagues of mine will deliberately sought for medical leave, thereby putting more pressure on the few left which I am a culprit. When departmental head could not get anyone to perform the works of the absentees, I become the link which have to bare and perform these task..... I do feel it was unfair though, but I have to give full commitment”

Likewise, balancing family and work together was a main challenge encountered by participant F. Workover load was the reason for this occurrence. However, according to participant the volume of workload was not because of employer assigning multiple task but because participant was trying to give sufficient time and commitment to family.

Participant F stated;

“When I try to give sufficient time to my family, I delay my official work. In that case, I work overtime and on weekends to complete the assigned task. My husband is not happy with my workload and schedule”.

The interviewee statement shows the unavoidable challenge that women encounter because of her involvement in a higher executive position. It is difficult for women to

juggle with family life and work. On top of that, lack of support from family/spouse makes it even harder.

To sum up, these life experience shared by Malaysian women express their sorrows and shows the level of difficulties that women have to go through to survive in corporate world. During their professional career these female respondents were bullied by their male peers for just being a female, their narrow minds had been inculcated with the seeds of thinking women as an inferior gender, therefore, they assumed that female peers would not even have answers for the questions being posed during work place meetings. Bias organizational culture demotivated women and created self-doubt of their own capacities Moreover, respondents also had to go through the agony of not giving their family enough time, because juggling with work and family becomes difficult when household and family responsibility comes solely under women duty. Table 6 below summarizes the challenges faced by Malaysian women in their journey.

Table 6. Challenges faced by Malaysian Women

Respondents	Challenges
A, F	Time management, Work-load, Lack of spouse support
B	Negative attitude of male peers/ clients
C	Discriminative behaviour from top executives
D	Receiving failing projects (previously assigned to male)
E	Organization setting based on Nepotism

4.5. Efforts and strategies to overcome challenges

This paragraph comprises the measures taken by women to overcome those challenges which they encountered during their professional journey. It intends to figure out their individual efforts and strategies which they implemented to seize the opportunities to elevate their career. Most of the respondents revealed that, from the initial stage of their career they had a hunch that it would be a difficult journey to traverse without preparedness. Hence, this helped them to utilize all the possible alternatives essential to reach and retain in the Malaysian workplace.

Although all the respondents encountered various sets of obstacles, their ideas and action implemented to overcome those are somehow similar. Respondents divulge that having a true positive attitude is a key that helps to achieve optimum performance. Positive attitude makes your perspective of life seem extensive and full of opportunities. Hence, participants demonstrated a clear vision and purpose of what they wanted in their career and how did they thrive for it despite of several challenges and difficulties.

Regarding the actions taken to prevail negative attitude of male peers and client's respondent B had this to say, in a customer oriented industry when bad behaviours from clients is encountered or where women expertise is ignored nothing can be done about it in such cases. It is client's perspective and their attitude of seeing women as inferior. However, the only thing that can be done is to not let this kind of negative scenario affect women performance and their career goal. This should provide women strength to move further advance in their profession so that they set an example to the coming generation.

Additionally, when the job is done better, with dedication and when your contribution towards organization is recognized, male peers will start appreciating and if they do not than women should just move on and continue focusing on duties and responsibilities. The interviewee added, no matter how hard the situation is if you know your potential and your abilities the voice of others should not distract your focus.

The interviewee B shared;

“The earlier years were very difficult but later on because of persistence and positive attitude ... I don't know if I changed their (male peers) mentality but I definitely enhanced their perspectives...If I was distracted by people's opinion and their rude behaviours towards me today I would not be here giving you this interview as a branch manager. “

Concerning the work overload issues, interviewee A indicated, to seek help from close colleague whenever possible. Since each people in the department are responsible for completing the assigned project, giving work load to single individual just because he or she is capable is totally unfair and illogical. The respondent also stated that, it is important to speak up for yourself and at times when you are aware that the assigned task is additional and bothering your daily life the only option was to share these issues with your immediate boss. Interviewee A further added that being able to balance between your work and life is crucial in order to be productive at whatever you do. Being involved in the different actives and hobbies provides time to relax and nurture individual ambitions. The involvement in different clubs and organizations assist to develop skills that can be used in the working life. It assists to develop soft skills and work etiquette. Interviewee A mentioned;

“I would join the clubs and society events at university as it provided me opportunities to escape from my work life and I enjoy mingling, sharing and listening to my students, it is a form of relaxation”

Respondent G emphasis on the greater importance of having a mentor to guide in the professional as well as personal life. The tendency of women doubting themselves, losing their focus, having difficulties to set the priorities and giving importance to other people opinion is higher compare to men. In that case having a mentor or role model to guide through those dilemmas can be very beneficial. Respondent further explained, mentoring is not about mentor telling exactly what to do. It is a conversation about professional and personal development. In order for mentor to understand mentee it is also crucial to build personal relationship. This will further help to provide necessary suggestion that women may require in their career. Respondent also suggest that having multiple mentors can

provide different perspectives of life and career which facilitates working women to find a choice among the various career path and to do best at their duties. Respondent said;

“My mentors helped me a lot. Whenever I had self-doubt, my mentors gave me perspective of my own personality whenever I had issues and doubt regarding my own abilities they boosted my confidence, my work related issues were lessened because I was provided with many solutions and options regarding how to deal with it”

Participant B shared the strategies and efforts taken to be in the position which she holds now. Participant explained the need to robust network despite of that individuals feel hesitant every time they try to build relationship. One thing that needs to be clearly understood is, networking is never about meeting strangers. It is about understanding the network that is already around you and acting accordingly. The respondent further explained the importance of establishing relationship with people within your institution before seeking to build network outside. When there is a higher position available it is most likely to be filled up by somebody who is already associated with that institution. Therefore, if you have already made a strong working connection you have built a pre-established relationship. As your manager knows you and your working ethics you are most likely to be selected to get the job done. On the other hand, as a manager there is a crucial need to build relationship with people. Building good working relationship ensures good coordination and cooperation that further fosters trust among parties. This will lead to accomplish task or specific goals. Participant B revealed that;

“most of the position filling and growth in the career happens because of the networking, you rely so much on your personal network, word of mouth. These days everything is online, e-service is a great platform but mostly only for entry level jobs, to further move up on the career ladder you have to establish a network and that is what I did too”

Responding on the individual efforts to be and maintain the current position, the interviewee C indicated how nurturing core competencies skills such as networking, negotiating and collaborating had a positive impact on respondent's promotion and career advancement. This was what interviewee had to say;

“At the beginning of my career I was responsible for managing only local market operation. When there was an opportunity for leading a regional marketing operation, I did whatever it took me to succeed. I always knew I was good at negotiating and networking. I had to outperform to show these capabilities if I had relied on the few ties and connection that I had, I would never have able to maintain and deliver my company’s core value in the foreign market and I would never have been where I am now.

Concluding remark from the respondent C indicated the significance of identifying individual core competencies and nurturing those competencies to grab the opportunities. It is definitely difficult for women in the labour market as they have to outperform to show their existence. However, when women understand their own strength and interest on particular field, it is crucial to specialized on those skills, that women are best at. When you deliver your expertise to company in exchange of it you get the bargaining power. In this way women can overcome those huddles that come across their career.

Five out of the seven respondent referred that, their decision to peruse higher education degree and professional certification played vital role to overcome several challenges in their career. Participants shared that, certification of their knowledge and know-how in the specific job context was a prerequisite to get promoted in a higher rank despite they had several years of working experience with excellent achievements. Likewise, other women who dares all the challenges that hampers their professional journey, shared their experience on how attending higher education facilitated their career development and self-empowerment that helped to battle career difficulties. The experience shared by the participants D, E and F summarizes what had been said by the rest.

“I started from a customer service department and was move to loan department and when I applied for an operation department I was asked for all kinds of certification related to banking sector and I did more than what I was required to do” (Respondent D)

“I was not given that promotion, I had education background up to bachelor’s degree only. I was not given that opportunity and that made me realized and I felt the importance of education. Then I joined for my MBA.....that was an eye opener for me, if this is what is pulling me down then I should give more time to this and achieve it. I have P.H.D now” (respondent E)

“As a child, I was a mediocre student, when I went abroad for my further studies and understanding the whole propose of me being away from home was to get education made me realized its importance. If I had not continued my education. I would never be an updated version of myself neither I would be able to sustain in this industry” (respondent F)

It is an undisputed fact that, education plays a vital role for women empowerment, development and prosperity. The importance of attending higher educational degrees and completing all kind of professional certification of the related field assisted Malaysian women to challenge the barriers that hindered their career. The experience shared by these respondents suggests the necessity of education in today’s competitive business world. In order to contribute and retain in the market place, it is crucial to gain updated knowledge.

The lived experience of 3 out of 7 respondents exhibits how woman’s decision to succeed in their professional career influence the other dimensions of life. Work life was directly or indirectly affecting their lives and in some cases the difficulties did not hold the respondents back from pushing through the challenges and achieving their aims.

Respondents expressed that their success might have been possible because they had no family commitments and was only focus on career goals. Respondent G had a career goal and was not ready to sacrifice professional career for the sake of family life. Respondent further added the reason for not choosing to marry was to avoid any kind of juggling between family obligations and professional career demand. Respondent G revealed;

“I knew my mother had to quit her job to take care of us and deep down I had an idea I would never be able to scarify my dreams for making a family. I was very good at studies and I had a clear life goal. I am 35 years old now, I choose not to marry. I don’t think I can handle any kind of family pressure and work together”.

Furthermore, respondent B also has almost similar grounds on choosing family life versus career. Respondent was very certain that the only reason for thriving in career was because of being single. Like other women, respondent had a desire to have a family but was aware that this would bring end to the professional career. Respondent B divulged that;

“I am single and that is the reason why I am doing good in my professional career. I wish to marry but I am not ready to settle as a housewife”.

Likewise, participant E shared that the nature of her work demanded various international meetings with organizational affiliations and consulting. Sometimes depending on the weight of the task, trips can be avoided but if nature of job is getting to know the demands of clients, then avoiding these trips will reflect on promotions and career advances. In this participant case, lack of moral support from spouse affected her personal and professional life. Therefore, instead of battling for abusive relationship participant decided to choose what mattered the most and in this case, it was participants career and life goal. Participant moans;

“My work demanded me to go for several international trips in a year, my husband was never happy about it and I always had issues, I was mentally disturbed. I am strong and independent women, I choose my career over abusive relationship. Therefore, I am single now”.

In brief, Malaysian working women attempted various tactics and strategies to fight against numerous challenges that constraint their involvement in the leadership roles. Table below summarizes some measures taken to overcome those barriers.

Table 7. Measures taken to overcome challenges

Challenges	Measures taken to overcome
Negative attitude of male peers/ clients	Focus on duties and responsibilities, Do not get distracted by others opinion
Work overload / Time management	Seek help from colleague, Share workload issues with immediate boss, Get involved in different clubs and societies as from of relaxation
Career and personal life dilemmas	Seek mentors help
Promotion issues	Establish relationship with people within institution, Nurture core competencies Develop interpersonal skills Pursuing higher education Get related professional certifications
Work-life balance	Decision to remain single

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The earlier chapter comprehensively discussed and analyzed the findings of this research. This chapter will provide summary of the research and contribution of this research to the existing literature will also be discussed. The main findings will be highlighted. The managerial implications, limitation of the study, as well as the suggestion for further research will be presented at last.

5.1. Summary and Main Findings

Women and leadership has been prevalently researched topic all around the globe. This research is triggered because of the increasing rate of female participation in the patriarchal Malaysian workforce. Main goal of this research is to discover how Malaysian women finds their ways to reach and retain in the leadership positions in Malaysian corporate world. Consequently, to understand their professional journey it is fundamental to identify the various factors such as facilitators (enabling supportive factors) challenges (barriers) and strategies adopted to overcome those challenges, that had come across their career path. In view of this, theoretical objectives were set to support the main goal. The main methodological framework used for this study comprised qualitative research approach with semi-structured questionnaires. The participants included seven women representatives from different professional sector in Malaysia. Their personal experience and opinions were gathered and analyzed to obtain empirical data for this research.

In the review of literature, organizational support, access to social network, women's network, supportive work environment and mentoring were identified as facilitators that ease women's journey towards leadership. Strong correlation between the existing literature and the current empirical findings was exhibited in regards of these facilitators. As identified by (Valerie 2017; Azmi et al. 2013; Bilimoria 2007) individual determinants such as training, work experience and knowledge plays a vital role for women career success. In the empirical finding updating oneself through attending related trainings, job learning and to be prepared for the jobs, support from family and spouse acted as an enabling factor that helped women during their career. The findings also contributed to the importance of organizational support to nurture women capabilities in order for them

to access top leadership positions (Burke & Vinnicombe 2005). All of the respondents admitted the significance of supportive work environment. Learning and development oriented company's culture provided women opportunities to lean areas of their interest and build their expertise. Additionally, the finding also supported the previous study by (Schmidt & Duenas 2002; Rogier & Padgett 2004; ILO 2004) on companies incorporating flexibility policies for working mothers. Respondents emphasized that organizational flexible policies for working mothers provided mental and emotional support and made it easy to balance between dual roles. Hence women being welcomed back at work after several months of maternal leave also provided sense of job security.

Furthermore, as mentioned in (Wanberg et al. 2003; Ragins & Kram 2007) on the effectiveness of having a mentorship program to support and encourage individual's advancement. The empirical findings suggested that mentorship program offered by companies helped to identify female talents at various university in Malaysia at the very early stage of their career as potential talents. This provided potential female talent, guidance and assistance in terms choosing right career path and developing their proficiencies. Furthermore, the empirical finding showed a strong correlation between the previous literature (Bilimoria et al. 2007) on women's personal traits and related behaviors for their career advancement. Participants exhibited traits such as ambitious, perseverance, hardworking, self-motivated and passionate and these qualities were reflected on their behaviors and actions during their professional journey and for possessed these qualities and attributes since their childhood.

On the other hand, literature identified gender stereotypes, glass, ceiling, work life-balance, family consideration and organization structure and culture were identified as the barriers or challenges encountered by women in their professional career. As indicated by (Schein 2001,) gender stereotypical attitudes has resulted "think- manager- think male" phenomenon. In the findings, female leaders' skills and intelligence were often ignored by male peers and clients. Their behavior showed that they presume women to be less authoritative and unsuitable for performing role as a leader. Participants indicated that they had to outperform to exhibit their abilities and effectiveness to show their existence in organizations. Difficulties in managing work and family together was

considered to be one of the main reason for Malaysian women existing from labor market (Talent Crop 2013; ACCA 2013). Similarly, the finding confirms the study (Welter 2000, Noor 2004, Shelton 2006) on women facing challenges to manage time for family duties and responsibilities. Participants encountered workload pressure in trying to balance their dual roles. Creating a balance between work and family was more difficult due to uneven distribution of responsibilities and lack of support from spouse. In the prior study (O'Neil et al.2008) explained how the that existence of traditional masculine organization culture foster the organizational practice and policies that negatively impact on hiring and promotions of women. The empirical finding demonstrated that, organizations higher executive was found practicing nepotism during promotion. Female with higher qualification and experience was ignored and men (relative of executive) less in experience and qualification was hired. Empirical finding discovered that female employees received less appreciation from their executives when they presented their constructive ideas. Moreover, organizational setting favouring men and demotivating female was flourishing as a culture. It was found that women were assigned major project in condition when it was difficult for male employees to accomplish it and women were expected to work on those falling projects.

In spite of encountering numerous challenges, these Malaysian women made their journey to leadership and managerial positions successful. Therefore, the main core subject of this research was to discover the strategies and efforts taken by them to overcome these difficulties or barriers to reach and retain in their positions. In the empirical finding, participants accentuated on the importance of women's personal development and growth. In order for personal development it was crucial for women to identify their core competencies (what they are best at) and nurture those competencies to utilize it efficiently and effectively during their career. Moreover, in the prior literature various scholars have highlighted the benefits of interpersonal factors such as mentoring, negotiating and networking for women's career growth (Zhong et al. 2011, Sarfaty et al.2007; Bierema 2005). The findings from the interview revealed two different perspectives on importance of establishing a network and negotiating. Firstly, those aspiring to move forward needs to establish a network within their own organizational institution prior seeking to build network outside. Building strong work ties through pre-

established relationship with immediate boss ensures recognitions which facilitates to build the first corporate ladder. Secondly, being able to showcase potential and capabilities ensure creditability and your importance in organizations will hence allow for better negotiations facilitating your requirements. The earlier literature identified the reason for professional women being single, divorced and childless was to avoid any kind of hindrances in their career (Tower & Alkadry 2008; Goldin & Katz 2002; Tocchioni 2018). Likewise, in the empirical finding women's decision to remain single was strongly related to them thriving to peruse their professional career and to avoid family commitments. Women are always expected to be the main care giver to family, to avoid these participants preferred to be single and follow their dreams.

Furthermore, to battle against negative attitude from male peers and clients, women had no choice expect ignoring and focusing on their main duties and not getting distracted from third party opinion. To overcome the workload and time management issue participants were found seeking help from their colleague and sharing their issues with immediate boss. Additionally, help from mentors was considered to be effective to guide women through career and personal life dilemmas. Lastly, women's decision to peruse higher education and complete necessary professional certifications, helped them to battle against barriers for higher promotions.

5.2. Managerial Implication

In today's diverse landscape of global business, it is crucial for companies to nurture their human capital to gain competitive edge. Therefore, the outcome of this study can be applied by organizations to retain these talents. In this context, organization can assist female talents to develop and grow their potential and capabilities that eventually can be reflected in company's performance.

First of all, the organizations can utilize the findings with respect to enabling supportive factors to formulate a learning and development oriented organizational culture. Providing opportunities to learn interpersonal skills, to enroll for trainings, to learn area of interests can be a means to facilitate their advancement.

Secondly, the result of this study can be very useful for executives and policymakers to identify the challenges presented in the organizational context and act accordingly to resolve for solutions. The negative attitudes towards females, discriminatory behaviors and practice of nepotism during promotion should be carefully investigated to facilitate equal and fair treatment for women. Additionally, multinational corporations and foreign direct investments intending their set up in Malaysian economy might find the results of this study helpful. These corporations can address the challenges and issues related to Malaysian women career advancement and formulated strategies to attract female talents.

Lastly, this study particularly may be beneficial for those women who seek to pursue higher level career and constrain themselves due to the presence of various barriers. The empirical findings provide various strategies and efforts taken by Malaysian women to overcome challenges and retain in the leadership positions. Thus, potential female talents may find these tactics useful for their professional journey.

5.3. Limitations and future study suggestions

This research has both theoretical and methodological limitations. Theoretical limitations can be found in the review of literature. As for the theoretical limitation, the sections on facilitators and barriers for women career advancement could have offered more interesting theories. The study covered only small section on overcoming barriers which could have been extended with more latest literature. In addition, for the methodological limitations, the empirical findings cannot be statistically generalized due to the explorative nature and qualitative methods used for this research. Moreover, the case selection is limited to working women in Malaysia. Therefore, the results from empirical findings may be useful for women in Malaysia but not necessarily for working women in other geographical regions. The limited number of sample for data collection can be seen as the weakness of this study. Total of seven interviews were conducted and based on their experience the results were derived. Due to the time difference and busy schedule of the respondent's interviews were conducted via Skype and also through emails. Absence of face-to-face interview restricted researcher to study respondent's facial

expressions and gestures which would be helpful to gain more insights on the critical issues.

This study proposes to figure out the journey of women to leadership position in Malaysian context. Future research can focus on the same issue but comparatively between two different countries. For instance, the comparative study would be interesting between two countries with distinct culture and economic background. Moreover, for the qualitative data both men and women perspectives on the topic can be used. It would help to discover how men perceive women leaders in different cultures. Furthermore, this study can be replicated to identify and explore the facilitators, challenges and strategies adopted by women in industry specific orientation. Additionally, quantitative study with large sample can be used to test the significance of the study. Finally, this research can be further extended to women in organizational C-suit to identify their journey of overcoming barriers and the efforts and strategies taken by them to retain as top leaders in different cultural context.

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APPENDIX 1. Semi-structured interview manual

Part A (Personal Information)

1. Please tell me something about yourself who you are and what you do?
2. How long have you been working?

Part B

1. Which factor has helped you to reach this position which you are holding now?
(Success factor).
2. What are the difficulties or challenges you faced during your professional journey? (such as work-life balance, family consideration or organizational culture.)
3. How did you overcome those challenges?
4. What strategies did you use to reach and retain in the position that you hold now?
5. What is your opinion: do you think your company has facilitated your career advancement? Can you share your experience?
6. In which area (personal, or professional) would you say you have had the most support or you would have needed additional support in order to make it easier to reach your current position?
7. Over the course of your leadership period, were any of the following topics relevant for you? If so, how? (Networking, Mentoring, Work-life balance, Professional Development)
8. What do you think about women's participation in the leadership position in Malaysian workplace?
9. What would be your advice for women who aspires to hold leadership and managerial position?

Would you like to add anything else?

