

## **CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN A PRIVATE ORGANIZATION IN MALAYSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In 21<sup>st</sup> century, women empowerment has become a hot issue around the world. Modern women are seeking for equal treatment with man and they are aggressively competing in politics, economics and social. Practically, women empowerment is still an illusion of reality in majority countries in the world. In Malaysia, inequality between male and female can be seen from Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) where males are still dominating most of the main sectors and higher ranks. This paper attempts to identify the various challenges faced by government bodies and NGO's to empower women and propose few ways to empower women in Malaysia especially in an organization. Information has been collected through surveys, interviews and together with secondary data were analyzed using SPSS. The studies found that women are being discriminated via various aspects especially at workplace. One of the main discrimination gathered through the survey is gender equality whereby female staffs tend to face greater discrimination especially in the aspect of promotion and allocation of task. Second finding is in the aspect of job stereotype whereby women graduates are being stereotyped when it comes to job application. The third finding shows woman also face discrimination in the aspect of pay scale, reward and compensation. Apart from these, there are also other aspects of discrimination gathered. Through this study, the researchers have proposed few suggested solution which could be impose to empower women in an organization.*

Keyword(s): Empowerment, Private Organization, Job Stereotype, Gender Equality and Discrimination.

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### **Introduction**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women empowerment has become a hot issue around the world. Modern women are seeking for equal opportunity with man and they are aggressively competing in various fields such as politics, economics and social sector. Many research also shows that women around the world are now standing equally with men in many perspectives and it is an undeniable fact to say sometimes women are far better than men when comes to certain issues. Developing countries upfront in empowered woman in many areas where their social background, culture and education level plays a vital role in getting women empowered. Empowered women are contributing towards the development of their country's economic, social and politics. According to Rajechwari (2015), women constitute almost 50% of the world's population and women in almost every country are being the backbone towards their country's development. On the other hand, according to Center for American Progress on Women's Leadership, it is believed that fully integrating women into a nation's economic life is essential for a society to flourish; yet, we have somehow managed not to heed it (2014).

Nevertheless, there are still many cases whereby women have become the victims of men. Every day around the world, women are being raped, abused and tortured, kidnapped, being slave to men and are involved in many discrimination aspects either at home or at workplace. Many challenges are being faced by these women such as gender discrimination, lack of education, female infanticide, and financial constraints (Rajeswari, 2015). World have endorsed The Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and many others in order to empower women around the world. Yet, practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality in many countries. Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully.

According to Judith Warner (2014), in America women has outnumbered men since 1988 and they hold almost 52% of all professional level jobs, and since 2002, they have outnumbered men in earning undergraduate business degree and yet, they have not moved up to positions of prominence and power in America. In a broad range of fields, their presence remains stuck at a mere 10% to 20% only. In America, it is now estimated that, at the current rate of change, it will take until the year 2085 for women to reach parity with men in leadership roles. In fact, the saddest part, stereotypes and skewed perceptions of women remain powerful and still impede the advancement of women. The dearth of women in various aspects creates the perception that women do not belong is high ranking positions or professionals that are in par with man.

Therefore, this study attempts to identify the various challenges faced by women, government and NGO bodies and other related departments to empower women in an organization generally and in private organization specifically. In addition, via this study the researcher also tries to suggest some measures to empower women in Malaysia. This article has been divided into several parts; brief description on the problems faced by women in an organization, past researches related to the subject in part 5 years, method used for the study, discussion on result and findings, ways to improvise women empowerment and end with conclusion and recommendations.

### **Women Empowerment**

According to Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) of United Nations (UN), women's empowerment means women gaining more power and control over their own lives. Riano, (1994) empowerment is not just individual achievements or assessing certain power positions, but "the way of energizing of individual and collective objects to participate in social movements and process of emancipation. Women empowerment comes from the root of the idea of power (Sharifah, 2015).

Women empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational, gender or economics strength of individuals and communities of women (Rajeshwari, 2015). Besides that, women's empowerment also can be defined as "women's ability to make strategic life choices which they had been previously denied from" (Anjuet al, 2009). In a nutshell, women's empowerment can also seen as an important process in reaching gender equality, which is understood to mean that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female" and according to the UN Population Fund, an empowered woman has a sense of self worth.

According to a group of researchers; Golla, Molhota, Nanba & Mehra (2011) women are economically empowered when she has the ability to succeed and the power to make and act on economic decisions. In fact, according to UN World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014, there are proven synergies between women's empowerment and economic, social and environmental sustainability. Women's active participation in decision making facilitates the allocation of public resources to investments in human development priorities, including education, health, nutrition, employment and social protection. For example, as female education levels rise, infant and child mortality rates fall and family health improves. Education also increases women's participation in the labour force and their contributions to house and national income. (<http://www.unwomen.org/media/headquarters/2014>)

There are a lot of benefits by empowering women in economic aspect. For instance, when more women work, economies grow: if women's paid employment rates were raised to same level as men's, the USA gross domestic product would be approximately 9% higher, the EURO zone's would climb by 13%, and Japan's would be boosted by 16%. In 15 major developing economies, per capita income would rise by 14% by 2020, and by 2% by 2030. Moreover, evidence from a range of countries shows that increasing the share of household income controlled by women, either through their own earnings or cash transfers, changes spending in ways that benefit children (Economic Empowerment of Women, 2013). Besides that, in the majority of countries, women's wages represent between 70% and 90% of men's, with even lower ratios in some Asian and Latin American countries (Economic Empowerment of Women, 2013).

Whole world is talking about that women are getting empowered and free to choose and decide their own well being. Nevertheless, various studies have been conducted related to women empowerment and gender equality around the world and many research found that dis-empowering women happened in many sectors. For instance, feminist working in the field of media has unveiled the limited portrayal of women's images, the increased presence of women in the media profession and despite this, the lack of progressive images of women in the media (Shanti Bhalraj, 2000).

Besides that, the importance of women's empowerment on the international development agenda is amply clear from the policy statements made at such high level international conferences as Beijing Platform for Action, the Beijing + 5 Declaration and Resolution, the Cairo Programme of Action, the Millennium Declaration and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women and together with other conventions, has identified that there is gender equality in both as a development objective in itself, as well as a means to promote growth, reduce poverty and promote better governance (Kamla Gupta & Princy Yesudian, 2006). These researchers also agreed that women's empowerment is important for ensuring not only their personal or household welfare, but also well being of society and responsible for modification of quality and quantity of human resources available in country in order to promote sustainable development. Apart from that, empowerment can also be seen through many perspectives and many researchers have used education, work participation at workplace, exposure to mass media, freedom of movement, autonomy and attitudinal changes in favor of gender equality as indicators of empowerment.

Neha Pandey (2014), wrote that status of women in India has been subject to many changes. Women faced equal status with men in ancient time then gone through low level in medieval and after that again trying to achieve a respective position in the society, but still they continue to face atrocities such as rape, acid throwing, dowry killings, domestic violence, human trafficking, forced prostitution of young girls and so forth and according to a global poll conducted by Thomson Reuters, India is the "forth most dangerous country" in the world for women and the worst country for women among the G20 countries.

According to Zaiton and Nooraini (2015), women are responsible for about half population of Malaysia and have participated in various sectors of employment such as manufacturing, business, service and agriculture, in addition to their traditional role in the unpaid domestic sectors of the economy. Many researches have concluded that the possibility of Malaysian women participating and succeeding in careers basically depends on their ability in balancing family and work.

Gender disparity in term of low status of women in India has been a matter of concern in many years, and India government has implemented various policies and programs to improve this situation (Kamla Gupta & Princy Yesudian, 2006). Research which was carried out by Esther found that in labor market opportunities, women are less likely to work; they earn less than men for similar work, and are more likely to be in poverty even if they work. In legal rights, women in many countries still lack independent rights to own land, manage property, conduct business, or even travel without their husband’s consent (Esther, 2012).

Other researches also discussed that gender inequality are often greater among poor, both within and across countries. Based on studies, the participation of women in the labor market has grown by 15% in East Asia and Latin America between 1971 to 1995, a rate faster than that for men, and the gender gap in wages has narrowed as well. The life expectancy of women has increased by 20-25 years in developing countries over the past 50 years (World Bank 2011), while male life expectancy did not improve as such. Is it the case that as countries develop, women’s empowerment will follow naturally (Esther, 2012).

Research by Zaiton and Nooraini (2015), under Malaysian Gender gap Index recorded an improvement in gender inequality from 0.34 in 1980 to 0.25 in 2009. However, the improvement has not come equally from all dimensions. Besides that, empowering women and providing them with equal rights and opportunities for fulfilling their potential is necessary to achieve business and economic progress.

In Malaysia, the National Advisory Council on the Integration of Women in Development was set up in the Prime Minister’s department in 1976 to look into women’s matter and it is was taken in support of UN’s declaration of the Women Decade in 1975, there were hardly any initiatives that were taken to address women’s position in society (Balraj.S, 2000).

**Research Objectives**

The purpose of this article is as follows:

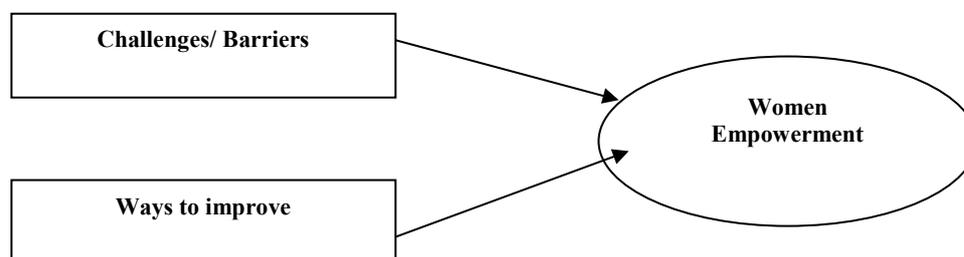
- To examine the challenges of women empowerment in a private organization in Malaysia.
- To propose few methods and measures to empowered women in private organization particularly and in Malaysia generally.
- To provide simple solutions to bridge the gap in women empowerment.

**Method Of Research**

Research was conducted at 5 private organizations in different types of industry around Klang Valley. Around 150 questionnaires were distributed equally to female staff from various departments and positions and 120 questionnaires were successfully re-collected and analyzed. In addition to this, information was also gathered through face to face interview with a few selected female staff on their perception towards women empowerment and challenges faced by them from male workers and their opinion on how the top management can empower women at their workplace. Apart from that, researcher also obtained information from secondary data such as library research and journal articles.

**Focus of Study**

**Figure 1: Theoretical framework for women empowerment in Private Organization, Malaysia**



**Table 1: Respondents distribution by industry**

No	Industry	Number of Respondents
1	Education	30
2	Manufacturing	30

3	Financial	30
4	Hotel	30
5	Food	30
	<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>

### Challenges Of Women Empowerment In A Private Organization In Malaysia

In Malaysia, inequality between male and female can be seen from Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) where males are still dominating most of the main sectors and higher ranks. The government has implemented many initiatives to empower women especially in education and workforce. These efforts intensify after the Convention on Elimination of all forms of action against women (CEDAW) in 1995. Thus, Malaysian government established Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development in 2001, amendment of Article 8 (2) Federal Constitution in 2001 (Sharifah, 2015).

In addition to this, government also introduced affirmative entitles the ‘At least 30% of Women in Decision Making Positions in Public Sector’ in 2004 and at the same time government hopes that the private sector and NGO will implement the same policy. As a result the percentage is increased from 11.8 per cent in 2006 to 33.7 per cent in year 2012. However, the percentage of women workforce in Malaysia is still remained 46.8% as the lowest rate in Southeast Asia compares to 78.6% Vietnam, 70.8% Thailand, 65.1% Singapore and 53.4% Indonesia (Sharifah, 2015).

Research shows that women play an important role in many levels such as family, workplace, NGO, politics, economic and society as a whole. Nowadays, it seems that women had achieved much success as men and even higher compared to men in many disciplines. However, women are still facing a lot of difficulties and challenges at their workplace and also in their communities. Government and Non-Governmental organization which related to women welfare and development have been taken many steps to empower women in order for them to gain their dignity, respect and at the same time contribute to their family and nation. Basically, women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure (Rajeshwari, 2015)

Research found that, women face different problems in different situation, which means women cannot be separated from problems particularly at their workplace. At workplace, gender discrimination or inequality between men and women can be seen and recognized in any decision making related to wages, terminations, promotions, hiring, leaves and benefits (Natalie & Katie, 2013).

According to Mdm. Anne (not actual name) who holds an executive position in a reputable organization claimed that her organization practiced inequality between gender in term of wage gaps where there is discrepancy between salary and benefits given to men for the same position and quality as well for same amount of the work. She also explained that she already highlighted this issue few times to her immediate superior and human resource department but no action taken to rectify the problem. According to UN Women, gender inequalities in time use are still large and persistent in all countries. When paid and unpaid work are combined, women in developing countries work more than men, with less time for education, leisure, political participation and self-care. Despite some improvements over the last 50 years, in virtually every country, men spend more time on leisure each day while women spend more time doing unpaid housework (EuroStat, 2014 as retrieved from UN Women, Progress of the World’s Women 2015-2016. Chapter 2, p. 84.). This world organization for women also agreed that more women than men work in vulnerable, low-paid, or undervalued jobs. As of year 2013, about 49.1% of the world’s working women were in vulnerable employment, often unprotected by labour legislation, compared to 46.9% of men (ILO, Global Employment Trends, 2014. Table A12, p. 99)

In addition, she also dissatisfied with the way of their employer treating men worker and women worker particularly when comes to promotion. Most of the time, men are get promoted even though women staff more suitable for that particular position with reason men are good in handling problems compare women. Her view on promotion can be supported by researcher Koshal et al (1998) where he stated that women are under-represented at all management rank due to women being discriminated for promotion to higher ranks despite their continued high performance. Opportunities for carrier advancement being ignored after recruitment by top management and this arewhy women are lopsided at senior level ranks. A part from that, studies found that about 49.9 per cent of women employees agreed that women in general have to work harder and longer to prove their credibility and ability in order to achieve the same level with men.

Mdm. Susila (not actual name) who works as an Assistant Manager, very much agreed to the research topic and she too shared her view on women empowerment. From the interview, she told that many women staff has been the victim to sexual harassment at her workplace, yet no report was made against the men staff as mainly due to embarrassment and some are even scared to take action as they might lose their job or even being a victim after working hours as their safety is not assured by the management. This is one of the heart wrenching challenge that most women faces in a working environment. She also agreed to the point that women in power have a greater potential of getting involved in this type of gender discrimination. Many men have the thought that a working women are compromising in nature which is the foundation for such vicious deeds and therefore women are just supposed to keep mum if such situation occurs as they choose to be in par with men. Meantime, according to her, it is indeed true that women have to face a lot of challenges before they get empowered.

Mdm. Loh (not actual name), a Coordinator also shared her dissatisfaction on number of women involvement in the higher position at her workplace. She claimed that she has been working for almost 10 years in her current firm and her promotion was given to a newly join male staff. According to her, this will bring to the gender earning gap and dissatisfaction among women employees when they started to realized men are easily to get promoted even if they don't really deserve the promotion. Another respondent Mrs. Kala, from a manufacturing industry also mentioned that challenges for women empowerment are many and it is also depends on the background, history and culture of the country. She also believed that work life imbalance among women particularly married women is the biggest challenge in women empowerment. Women tend to mix up work commitments with personal priorities. Due to this, women afraid to take any responsibility and most of the time it have been excuses for not giving women the responsibility.

Ms. Shirle (not actual name), a Senior Executive responded, women who driven by emotion and instinct, it is a toughest challenge in office politics and it can be said power play can hurt women's inner soul and disturb her mental peace. Men, when comes to organizational politics apparently are able to strive compared to women. According to Shirley, a lot of organizational political tricks are involved at her workplace and this has caused high turnover among the female staff.

Besides this, women dis-empowerment has negative implications on broader economic development and based on World Health Organization (WHO), gender inequality have the direct and indirect cost to the nation.

### **Ways To Empower Women In An Organization**

Majority of the respondents feels free to share their opinions and views with research on women empowerment. They agreed that private organization should find way to encourage women empowerment as government did for the public sectors. After the policy implementation, there are positive implications and number of women in higher ranks also increased. Thus, private sector also should discuss with their employees particularly with women employees on how they can be empowered at workplace.

There are few ways which can implement by a private organization. One the way to eliminate pay inequality is by applying distributive justice in rewards and compensation management. Organization should pay equal pay to men and women without gender discrimination if they are in the same position and perform same task and quantity of work. Equal pay will help women to get job satisfaction and this will indirectly help to empower women at their workplace. Apart from this, Human Resource Department and Head of Department also must make sure performance management in place and everyone should do appraisal accordingly regardless of gender. Promotion should be based on performance appraisal. This method definitely will help women to get empowered in their organization.

Along with this, other ways employers can approach sex discrimination at workplace is also by performing a workplace audit to identify internal practices that lead to this practice. For example, an employer may discover that only men are promoted to management positions within the organization. An audit could jump-start initiatives to recruit and retain women for management positions. This will also indirectly boost women to strive higher in an organization.

However, Mdm. Susila (not actual name), an Assistant Manager and also a single mother of 2 had another view on curbing this problem. She suggested curbing this problem by providing flexible working hour to all female workers or what we call as workplace flexibility especially to those married and single mothers. This diversification of working time arrangement has been driven not only by globalization but by the social changes especially on the entry of large numbers of women into the workforce. This flexible working hour has enabled a wide variety of families to meet multiple responsibilities especially those who are responsible for child care and such practice can boost labour market participation among women worker and they are able to utilize their skills more effectively and thus allow business to remain more competitive and retain talent. This would offer the potential to produce positive employment outcomes for women and giving them equal opportunity to strive along with men and at the same time still upholding the family and child care needs.

On the other hand, based on feedback received, Ms. Shirle (not actual name), a Senior Executive also agreed that internal trainings do play an important role in women empowerment as it's the best approach towards gender discrimination. These trainings helps to create awareness on gender issues and how it effects the inter-office relationships. At times, internal training also do act as an eye opener especially to those on the lower level especially on their rights and how they should be treated, rather than just being submissive to others. It also helps to explore attitudes and belief system on gender issues. With this, women will be given equal opportunity towards career development.

Last but not least, the researchers also realised that it's high time the government reshuffle the way some workers are being employed in certain unit or career path. Gone are the days that only mans are fit for uniformed job such as armed force, police and etc and women are only fit to be housewives or secretary. This is the era whereby women are working hard and striving to be treated equally to man. Therefore, how could this equality be achieved especially when applying for a job? What if the government or recruitment agency simply adopt placement test as the first step when comes to any job application. You are qualified to sit for the placement test as long as you have the proper qualification. Therefore, anyone especially male or female can apply for any job or post as long as they have the suitable qualification and sit for the entrance exam. At the same time, Malaysian government should adopt and adapt Women's Empowerment Principles which developed through a partnership between UN Women and the United Nations Global Compact. The principles are as follow:

- ✓ Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality
- ✓ Treat all women and men fairly at work—respect and support human rights and non-discrimination
- ✓ Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers

- ✓ Promote education, training and professional development for women
- ✓ Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women
- ✓ Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy
- ✓ Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/partnerships/businesses-and-foundations/womens-empowerment-principles>

### **Recommendations And Conclusion**

As a conclusion, this study indicates that though it is true that women do face discrimination at workplace from all aspects either via wages, promotion or even equal opportunities but with globalization it is high time that women are given equal opportunities for them to strive together with men. This can only be achieved if there is cooperation from all people from all the levels in an organization and this should be supported by government inspiration. Though based on research, there isn't any country that has fully achieved equality between man and woman but this can be a reality if the right steps are taken.

One of the ways to improve women empowerment in an organization is by using standard performance management for the purpose of evaluating their employees regardless of gender. Management must ensure men and women are getting equal pay for same position and amount of the work they performed. Top management in an organization should make sure Human Resource Department plays its role accordingly without any discrimination.

Besides that, in order to reduce the number of sexual harassment, employers should adopt and emphasize a zero-tolerance violence and sexual harassment policy at work. Businesses should invest in health insurance policies that include counseling; they need to respect all workers' rights to medical leave and counseling for themselves and their dependents. Apart from that, in order to promote women's empowerment, UN Women suggests that employers spread the word within the community about their commitment to inclusion and women's empowerment principles. Employers should partner with other businesses to advocate for gender equality and more opportunities for women.

It is also important to recognize women who contribute and work in leadership roles within the community (<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/women-empowerment-workplace>). In addition to this, one of the suggestions from UN Women recommends that businesses provide equal access to company-supported education and vocational training programs. Employers should encourage women to pursue nontraditional jobs and ensure that all employees have equal opportunities to get involved with mentoring programs.

It is believed that women who are empowered have become a solution to poverty, poor health and vulnerability for their families and within their communities. Incredible potential is reached with the benefit of support, financial resources and ongoing encouragement. Finally, the important measure of a women success should be when they enable women to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

The research objectives were achieved through interviews and surveys where at the end of the study found the challenges of women empowerment in a private organization. Meantime, few suggestions were offered to solve this women empowerment problem such as;

- ✓ Implementation of integration of women in development in private sector.
- ✓ Apply distributive justice in reward and compensation management.
- ✓ Proper performance management.
- ✓ Perform work place audit.
- ✓ Provide flexible working hours.
- ✓ Provide equal internal trainings.
- ✓ Adopt and adapt Women's Empowerment Principles under UN Women.
- ✓ Invest in health insurance policy and counseling.

With all these above, women empowerment is definitely within ones reach and aim.

### **Limitation Of Study**

Although this study was successful to certain extend and carefully prepared however the researcher is still aware of its limitation and shortcomings. First, because of the time and cost limit, this study was conducted only on a small size of population (5 organizations with 30 respondents each). Therefore to generalize the results for larger groups the study should have involved more respondents at different level in future. Second, this study was conducted in private organizations only and therefore in future the study should also cover public sectors, private sectors and NGO. Thirdly, the data collected were only from those who agreed to be interviewed as some of the respondents were still skeptical to voice out or even to admit the discrimination faced in their organization as they are afraid of losing their job or people would not believe in them. Finally, the data collected were also limited as the respondents were mainly from middle and high level position under professional category. In future, the researcher should target respondents from various industries and from all the levels.

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