

Perceptions towards Female Leadership in Malaysia

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Abstract: Despite a growing number of research focused on the leadership of professional working groups with male leaders, in contrast, research on women leadership has received little attention. This study investigates the perceptions of employees toward women leadership. The study assesses the leadership attribute (affection, efficiency and collaboration) that is highly associated with women leadership and to compare the different perceptions between males and females regarding female leadership. Data were collected from 1530 (n = 1530) government, private and semi-government institutions. The results revealed that efficiency was rated as the most common attribute associated with women leadership followed by collaboration and affection. Moreover, it was shown that women employees had a significantly higher level of positive perception towards women leadership as compared to male employees. Finally, the results showed that the gender of the immediate superior significantly related to the employees' positive perception toward female leadership. The implications of the findings for research and practice are discussed.

Key words: women leadership, perception, employees

1. Introduction

1.1 Definition and Essence of Leadership

Literature on leadership is both plentiful (over 10,000) (Kriger & Seng, 2005, p. 773) and diverse (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). Several definitions and theories of leadership exist (Eddy & Van DerLinden, 2006). Leadership can be defined in different ways. It lacks universal and unanimous meaning because it is “complex” (Achua & Lussier, 2013). “Leadership is the influencing process of leaders and followers to achieve organizational objectives through change.” (p. 6). Key elements of any definition of leadership include leaders-followers, influence, organizational objectives, change and people (Achua & Lussier, 2013; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008, p. 182). In effective leadership, leaders and followers are influenced by each other (Knapp, 2008). Effective leaders always pass ideas to their subordinates for their acceptance and motivate followers for bringing change by implementing and supporting their ideas (Achua & Lussier, 2013, p. 7; Galvin, Balkundi, & Waldman, 2010).

The essence of leadership is “movement”, “taking the organization or some part of it in a new direction”, “solving problems”, “being creative”, “initiating new programs”, “building organizational structures”, and “improving quality” (Davis, 2003, p. 4; Eddy & Van Der Linden, 2006). Stewart (2006) asserts that leadership

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essentially means transformational leadership while management is transactional leadership. However, for effective leadership one must have knowledge, skills, and ability (KSAs). Skills like technical skills, interpersonal skills, and decision-making skills are required based on the level of management and managerial leadership roles. Mintzberg's management role theory identified ten roles that leaders have to perform to accomplish organizational objectives. A set of roles — Interpersonal roles which include figurehead role, leader role, and liaison role; Informational roles which include monitor role, disseminator role, and spokesperson role; Decisional roles which include entrepreneur role, disturbance-handler role, resource-allocator role, and negotiator role — is supported by the research (Achua & Lussier, 2013, pp. 11–16).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

It is common practice for male managers to underestimate women (Van Vugt et al., 2008, p. 192; White & Özkanlı, 2010, p. 192). “Leaders’ interpersonal attributes are associated with relational-oriented behaviours, which improve affective criteria such as follower satisfaction with leader” (Derue et al., 2011, p. 37). Variation of interpersonal behaviour may mediate the level of perception on female leadership.

A research was conducted with an Australian and Turkish sample to analyse differences in perceptions of gender and leadership. The research found different perceptions about gender and leadership reflecting different economic and social contexts. The majority of Turkish respondents did not engage in a discussion on the topic and did not believe that women experienced discrimination as managers. In contrast, Australian respondents acknowledged discrimination. Perceptions of leadership in Turkish universities were aligned with a predominantly masculine/transactional model, and in Australia had moved from heroic masculinity to more inclusive leadership styles, consistent with a transformational leadership model (White & Özkanlı, 2010).

The present study seeks to investigate the people's perception toward female leadership because historically women were largely excluded from leadership and managerial roles in organizations in Malaysia. As the situation of women involvement in leadership roles is changing, there must be differing perceptions of the role of women and men in top positions and the gendering of these positions among both men and women. The present research attempts to answer the following research questions:

(1) Which leadership attribute (affection, efficiency or collaboration) is highly associated with female leadership?

(2) What position is dominated by working women in Malaysia?

(3) Is there a significant difference between male and female workers in perceiving female leadership?

(4) Does gender of immediate superior significantly relate to employees' positive perception toward female leadership?

1.3 Research Objective

(1) To determine the attributes and characteristics associated with female leadership.

(2) To identify the position of women in organizations in Malaysia.

(3) To measure the effect of gender of respondents, gender of immediate superior in an organization, work experience, company type and size on the perception of female leadership.

(4) To observe the difference on the way employees perceive male and female leadership.

2. Research Background and Context

In the Middle Ages, Christine De Pizan mentioned that the informal role for women was to be a “good princess”, which might reveal the exclusivity of the formal leadership roles to men (Wren et al., 2004, p. xix). De Pizan addressed ideal leadership in behavioural terms that might be summarized in concepts such as; “justice”, “accountability”, “force of character” (Wren et al., 2004, p. 108). In addition, she mentioned being kind, modest and religious (Wren et al., 2004, pp. 108–109), and her ability to “preserve the honour of her lord and yet prevent the war” (Wren et al., 2004, p. 110). De Pizan’s book reflects the convictions that were dominant in the Middle Ages about the expectations of female roles in society. Even though women were not always in the limelight, they played an effective role in controlling the direction of the leadership.

Virginia Woolf mentioned Coleridge’s pattern of a great mind: “androgynous” (Wren et al., 2004, p. 115), which means: “resonant and porous, that it transmits emotion without impediment, that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (Wren et al., 2004, p. 115). Woolf had an assumption that if the mind could combine the best of male and female, this would be the best mind for leadership (Wren et al., 2004, p. xx).

Rice, Bender and Vitters (1982, p. 244) attracted the researchers towards validating leadership theories in the gender context to see “whether or not a particular theory does or does not generalize to female leaders”. Several studies about the effect of gender on leadership were carried out by Burnett, Anderson, and Heppner (1995); Careless (1998); Druskat (1994); Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt and van Engen (2003); Eagly and Johnson (1990); Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995); Ganguli and Krishnan (2005); Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra (2006); Imran, Zaheer and Noreen (2011); Kawatra and Krishnan (2004); Kent, Blair, Rudd and Schuele (2010a); Maher (1997); Manning (2002); Rowley, Hossain and Barry (2010).

In recent years, women have increasingly entered leadership roles that were traditionally occupied mainly by men (Kennedy, 2002). In this case, the comparison between men and women leadership styles continues to attract attention of social science researchers. However, the context for this study is the perceptions of men and women about female leadership in Malaysia. According to White and Özkanlı (2010, p. 6), “small but significant gender differences in leadership styles exist”, for example, Burke and Collings (2001); Eagly (2003).

A study conducted by McShane and Glinow (2009) indicated that women are rated higher than men on the emerging leadership qualities of coaching, teamwork, and empowering employees. Further, they argue that women adopt a participative leadership style more readily than their male counterparts. In a recent study, Konrad, Cannings and Goldberg (2010) found that women who had a male supervisor reported less organizational support. They also found that women worked in an organization with a male head reported more gender discrimination. ‘Women are still portrayed as suffering disadvantage in access to leadership positions as well as prejudice and resistance when they occupy these roles (Eagly, 2007).

The important question rises about whether history records the occurrence of female global leaders or not. The accurate answer might be gained through Adler’s (1996) research on “global women political leaders”, who investigated 25 women occupied the highest political level in their countries. She found that 11 women served as PM or president in their countries (Bangladesh, Dominica, Iceland, Ireland, Nicaragua, Norway, Pakistan, Turkey, Sri Lanka and Switzerland). While 14 women contributed to politics through their positions as the leadership elite in the modern state (Argentina, Great Britain, Canada, the central Africa republic, France, Haiti, India, Israel, Lithuania, Netherland-Antilles, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal and the former Yugoslavia) (Adler, 1996, p. 135).

Careless (1998, p. 897) expected in his research that females and males may differ in their use of certain transformational leadership behaviour. Data taken from an Australian sample revealed that female managers ($M = 30.26$, $SD = 3.25$) perceived themselves as more likely to use transformational leadership than male managers ($M = 29.15$, $SD = 3.51$). However, White and Özkanlı (2010, p. 8) found that some Turkish women would not accept women leadership, because women are “harsh”.

The leadership of women is chosen often in the period of crisis, this indicated that they may be suitable for tackling states of crisis (Wooten, 2007, p. 76). Congruency of gender role in the organization or industry is also a factor for which a woman leader is chosen. Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra (2006, p. 58) found an overall prejudice against the female candidate, except when she worked in an industry congruent with her gender role.

The role of women in Malaysia today is the outcome of a complex amalgam of traditional Malay custom, Muslim law, and more recent social, political, and legal developments. There are examples of Malay women as warriors, traders, and teachers from a long time ago (Kennedy, 2002). Malaysian women's participation in commerce may exist in any of the four categories of employment status, i.e., as an employer, an employee, an own-account worker or an unpaid family worker. The Malaysian Labour Force Report (Department of Statistics, 2004, p. 44) documents that out of the total working female population in 2003, 77.5% were paid employees, 11.7% were own-account workers and 9.6% were unpaid family workers. Only 1.2% were categorized as employers (Idris, 2008).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedure

In total, 1530 ($n = 1530$) workers from the government (22.0%), private (64.8%) and semi-government (13.2%) institutions participated in this study. The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 57 years ($M = 27.43$, $SD = 7.78$). The respondents consisted of 44.1% male workers ($n = 672$) and 55.9% female workers ($n = 852$). Meanwhile, six of the respondents did not indicate their gender. In addition, the sample comprised employees from different races (Malay, Chinese and Indian). It is worth noting that the respondents' highest academic qualification was the PhD degree.

In collecting the data, the convenience sampling method was adopted. Convenience sampling or sometimes called opportunity sampling involves choosing respondents who happen to be available and accessible at a particular time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The reasoning behind this choice is based on the perceived difficulty to access respondents which consist of individuals of different occupations, different ages, and different educational levels. Convenience sampling is deemed a strategic and realistic approach to this kind of study given that it involves large sample size and involves sample from different background (Cohen et al., 2007). The samples were assessed at various shopping complexes in Klang Valley such as Berjaya Times Square, Ampang Point, Wangsa Walk, KL Festival and many more. The visitors of these shopping malls were approached at the entrance of the malls and invited to share their opinions on women leadership through this questionnaire. In addition, there are some governmental and semi-governmental offices such as Hasil (tax company), Felda (palm oil company), Bernama for Malaysian TV, DBKL, and IIUM. Their participation in this study was voluntary.

3.2 Measure

The respondents completed the Women Leadership Perception questionnaire (Achoui, Bosna, Khalifa, Bazaid, Abdullah, Adawiya, Hamdawi & Fal, 2013). This instrument gauges three leadership attributes of women

leadership perception construct: (1) affective attribute; (2) effective attribute; and (3) collaborative attribute. It is a self-report measure that consists of 16 items. The items and their respective factors are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 A Sample of the Survey Paper

No.	Items	Factor
1	I prefer that my immediate superior is a woman	Affective attribute
2	I accept that my immediate superior is a woman	
3	No difference between woman and man in leadership style	
4	Women in leadership positions treat women employees worse than men employees	Effective attribute
5	Women in leadership positions do not discriminate between women and men employees	
6	Women are more efficient than men in leadership positions	
7	Women in leadership positions are less authoritarian than men	
8	Women in leadership positions pay more attention than men about feelings at work	
9	No difference between men and women in work related to the decision making process	
10	Women in leadership positions care more than men about achieving organizational goals	
11	Women in leadership positions care more than men about human relations with employees	Collaborative attribute
12	Women in leadership positions are more collaborative than men	
13	Women in leadership positions are more permissive than men	
14	Women in leadership positions delegate authority more than men	
15	Women in leadership positions assist me in being successful more than men	
16	I trust women leaders more than I do men leaders	

In this instrument, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with particular statement using a five-point Likert scale, with (1) indicating strongly disagree and (5) indicating strongly agree. The author reported the reliability estimates (coefficient alphas) for the three dimensions of affective attribute, effective attribute and collaborative attribute were .701, .755, and .782, respectively. As the reliability coefficient for these factors were larger than .70, thus, it indicated that the items have a good reliability. Initially, the reliability coefficient for effective attribute was .631, however, after removing a weak item (item 4: Women in leadership positions treat women employees worse than men employees), the reliability coefficient improved to .755. Therefore, this item was excluded for further analysis.

4. Results

RQ 1: Which leadership Attribute (Affection, Efficiency or Collaboration) is Highly Associated with Female Leadership?

According to Table 2, There are three leadership attributes that are regularly associated with women leadership. Findings of the study revealed that efficiency ($M = 3.16$, $SD = .64$) was rated as the most common attribute associated with women leadership followed by collaboration ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .71$) and affection ($M = 2.95$, $SD = .83$).

Table 2 The Mean and Standard Deviation Scores of the Leadership Attribute Associated with Female Leadership

No.	Leadership attribute	M	SD
1	Affection	2.95	.83
2	Efficiency	3.16	.64
3	Collaboration	3.10	.71

RQ 2: What Position is Dominated by Working Women in Malaysia?

Table 3 revealed that most of the working women in Malaysia employed as an inferior employee (70.1%). Meanwhile, 14.6% of them hold a position as a middle manager, followed by lower manager (10.9%) and high manager (4.4%).

Table 3 The Descriptive Statistics of the Position of Working Women (n = 841) in Malaysia

No.	Position	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	High manager	37	4.4
2	Middle manager	123	14.6
3	Lower manager	92	10.9
4	Employee	589	70.1

* 4 missing cases

RQ 3: Is There a Significant Difference between Male and Female Workers in Perceiving Female Leadership?

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the perception of male and female workers in perceiving women leadership. The level of positive perception towards women leadership as perceived by female workers ($M = 3.23$, $SD = .56$) was higher than those of male workers ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .62$). The test was significant, $t(1470) = -9.92$, $p = .00$ at .05 α level two tails. The magnitude of the difference in the means was small with eta squared = 0.057 (Green & Salkind, 2005). Therefore, it can be inferred that gender has a small effect in perceiving positive perception towards female leadership; female employees tend to have a better perception of female leadership as compared to male employees.

RQ 4: Does Gender of Immediate Superior Significantly Relate to Employees' Positive Perception of Female Leadership?

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether gender of immediate superior significantly related to employees positive perception toward women leadership. Results revealed that the level of positive perception towards women leadership as perceived by employees whose immediate superior is woman ($M = 3.22$, $SD = .58$) was slightly higher than employees whose immediate superior is man ($M = 3.03$, $SD = .61$). The test was significant, $t(1415) = -5.73$, $p = .00$ at .05 α level two tails. The magnitude of the difference in the means was small with eta squared = 0.023 (Green & Salkind, 2005). Therefore, the obtained result revealed that gender of immediate superior has a small effect in perceiving positive perception towards female leadership; employees who have female superior tend to have a better perception on female leadership as compared to those who have male superior.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the findings indicated that most people agree that female leadership is as effective as male leadership. This is because efficiency was rated as the most common attribute associated with female leadership followed by collaboration and affection. It is therefore suggested that future research could focus on the styles of female leadership that lead to its effectiveness. Since the number of female leaders is increasing, further studies also can concentrate on ways to enhance their leadership. Meanwhile, the findings also revealed that female employees had a significantly higher level of positive perception towards female leadership as compared to male

employees, and employees who have female superiors tend to have a better perception of female leadership compared to those who have male superiors. These findings signify that gender-bias is still exist in contemporary society. Therefore, more actions should be taken to educate the public and promote awareness of gender equality.

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Appendix

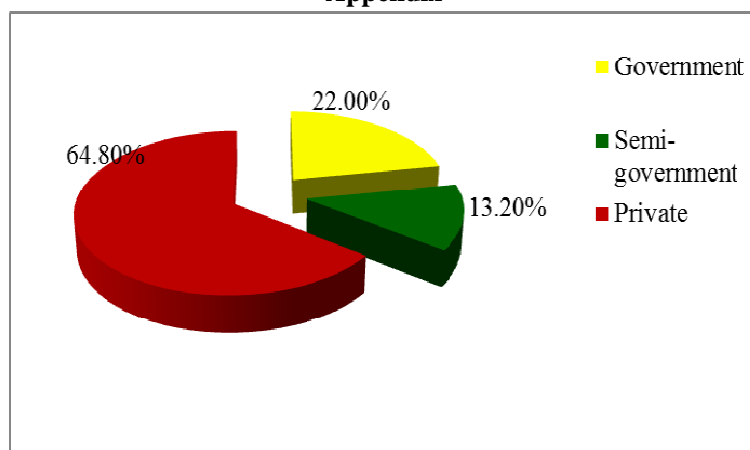


Figure 1 The Percentage of Government, Semi Government and Private Companies

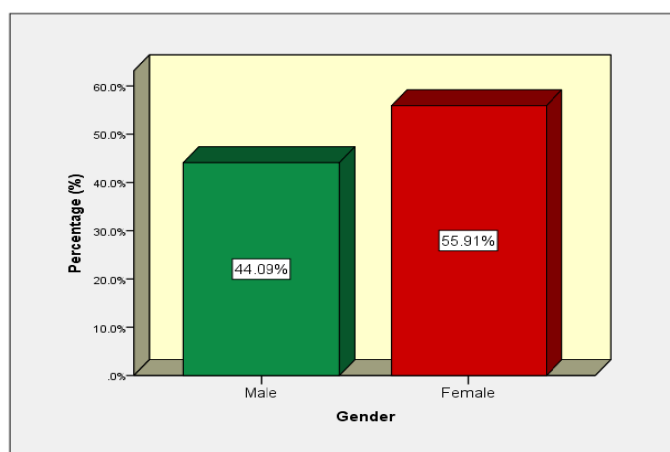


Figure 2 The Percentage of Male and Female

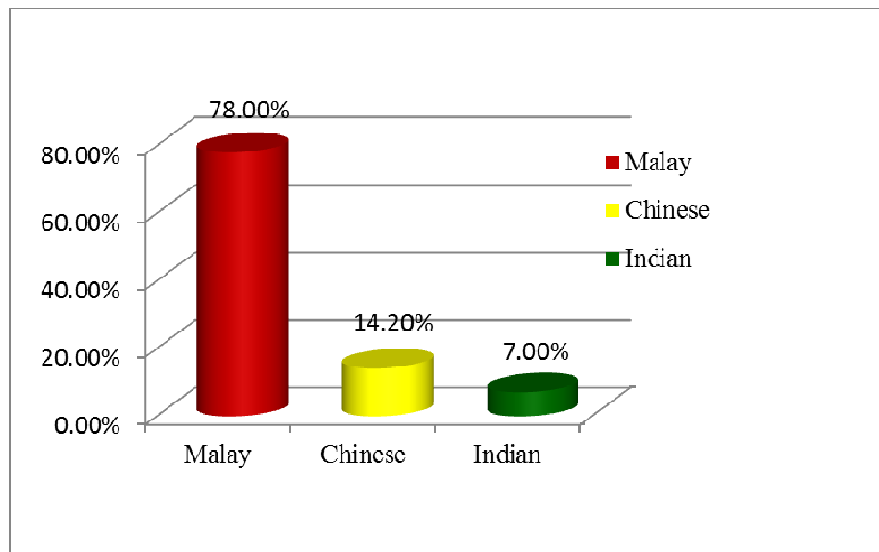


Figure 3 The Percentage of Malay, Chinese and Indian

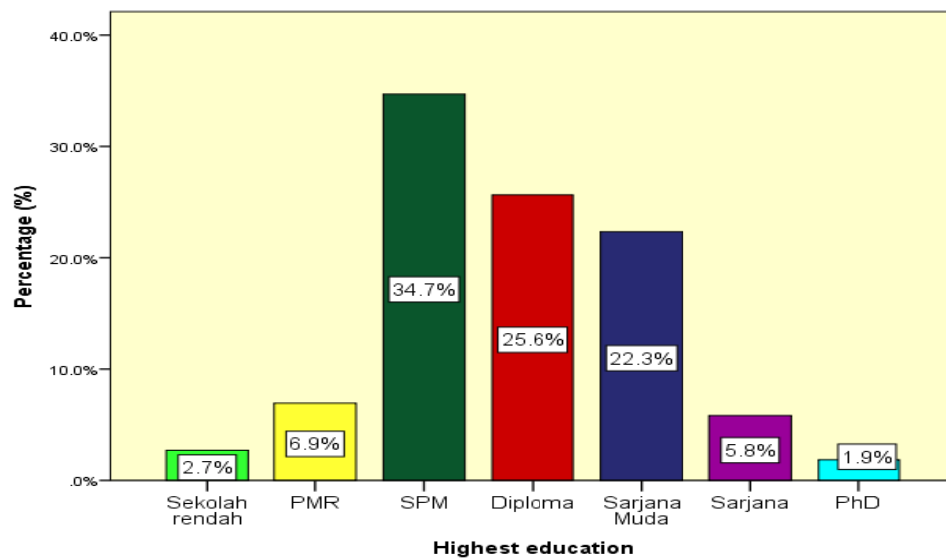


Figure 4 The Percentage of Different Educational Levels