

# WOMEN'S INTENTION TO ENTER TOP MANAGEMENT IN MALAYSIA: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE "GLASS CEILING" PHENOMENON

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**Abstract** - Malaysia has undergone a transformation over the past few decades as they move from a primarily agrarian society to modern industrial society. These economic changes have important implications on demographic and labour issues. Even though an increase in demand for a highly skilled workforce has seen more women enter the labor force, but the number of women at top management level is considerably very low. "Glass ceiling" in this study represents the barriers that women face to enter top management positions in the organization. Glass ceiling is categorized into two main categories in this study: (1) personal challenges that consist of demographic factors, family commitment and family support; and (2) work challenges that consist of negative stereotype, workplace arrangement, organizational culture and career development opportunities. The implications of this issue range from micro level, such as women's dissatisfaction over the job opportunities and exiting from the labor force to macro issues such as brain drain and migration. This study aims to identify the main challenges that women face to enter top management positions in Malaysia either it is from personal challenges or work challenges. 300 respondents were selected in order to collect the data. Using cross-tabulation analysis and descriptive analysis, it was found that demographic factors, family commitment, organizational culture and career advancement opportunities have a more significant influence on women's intention to enter top management. While family support, negative stereotype and workplace arrangements have less significant influence on women's intentions to move up the career ladder. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the "glass ceiling" phenomenon that hinder women's intention to enter top management in Malaysia come from both personal and employers' challenges.

**Keywords** : women's, intention, top management, glass ceiling, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

Women have been identified as an important resource that can be 'mobilized to achieve national development agenda according to the Malaysian government both in Seventh and Eight Malaysian Plan. Malaysia total population for the year of 2013 stands at 29.9 million where 48.6% of 14.5 million are females and the remaining 51.4% of 15.3 million are males (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013). The participation of women in the labor force had

been increasing since 1957 where most of them were engaged in paid employment, self-employed and unpaid family workers in all economic sectors. Overall, female participation in the labor force has accounted for 52.4% as reported for the year of 2013 compared to only 46.8% in 2010 (TalentCorp, 2015). It also reported that Malaysia is aiming to increase the participation of women in the labor force to 55% by 2015.

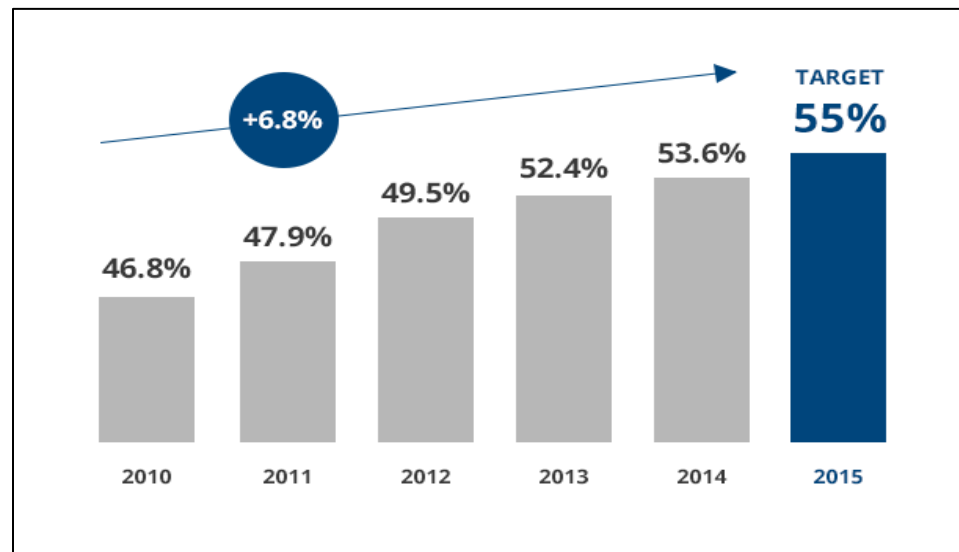


Figure 1: Female Labor Force Participation Rate in Malaysia (2010-2015)  
(Source : TalentCorp, 2015)

The increase in women's educational level had become an important factor that contributes into the increasing of number for women participation in labor force in Malaysia. Education attainment is very essential to the improvement of women's living of standard which at the same time allowing them to become more actively in the decision making process within family, community, workplace and political area (Masayu, Khalili, Esa, & Miskiman, 1990). Consequently, the previous thought that women right to higher education because of gender has become been successfully get rid by Malaysia. Women nowadays are empowered with education and have better prospects in the labor market through better access to education. A recent national intake shows that women dominate more than 65 per cent of students enrolled in tertiary education in Malaysia according to the Prime Minister, Dato' Sri Najib bin Tun Haji Razak on his current speech on "3<sup>rd</sup> Global Conference on Women Deliver 2013" (Razak, 2013).

Majority of women tend to pursuit their study to higher level, according to the Human Capital theory they should have potential for their career advancement. However, the number of women in top management still low because of certain factors. This phenomenon has been called as the "glass ceiling" where it seems that women going to climbing up the organizational ladders, but is actually very few of them actually make it to the top positions.

Besides that, it also shows that although more women are involves in professional jobs, but there is still more men are managers in the employment. According to the latest statistics show that only 26% of women are involved in top management positions (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2013)

Thus, the main problem that will be discussed in this study is the lack of female representation at top positions due to the glass ceiling effect and other challenges that will lead into gender gap because women are under-utilized resource in the labor market. The implication of this problem is as in the range of micro level issues such as dissatisfaction among women workers that will lead into the exiting from the labor force to macro issues such as brain drain and migration to overseas job markets for better job opportunities.

Therefore the focus of this study is to identify main factors or challenges that might influence intention of women entering top management either it is due to the personal challenges or employers challenges that hinder them from climbing into the top management position.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Economic Theory**

The underlying economic theory applied in this research was the Human Capital theory and inequality in gender that falls under labor market discrimination theory. The human capital theory discusses how education is related to the human capital investment. The labor market discrimination theory discusses the effect that might arise due to the inequality or gender gap between females and males in the labor force.

Human capital can be referred to as the knowledge and skills that labors acquire through education, training and experience (Mankiw, 2001). Majority of women tend to pursuit their study to higher level, according to the Human Capital theory they should have potential for their career advancement. However, the number of women in top management still low because of certain factors.

The most relevant theory that explains the issue that arises due the human capital investment theory is labor market discrimination. Labor market discrimination is said to exist if individual workers who have identical productive characteristics are treated differently because of the demographic groups to which they belong that alleged to take two prominent (1) wage discrimination and (2) occupational discrimination (Smith, 2006).

### **2.2 Women in Top Management and Firm Performance**

Women's participation in top management of an organization have given a positive impact to the firm performance either in term of leadership styles, firm financing and so on. Several studies have shown the impact of women's involvement in top positions and the good firm performance.

### **2.3 Glass Ceiling Phenomenon**

Studies have identified several main factors or barriers that hinder women's intention to top positions and decision-making levels in an organization. Some of the main barriers are responsibilities that women have towards family, cultural barriers between religious and racial, negative stereotype and leadership styles and organizational culture in the workplace among co-workers and colleagues (Blair-loy, 2009; Clark, 2000; Hoobler et al., 2011; Schein, 2001). All of

these barriers that hinder women's career advancement likely known as one term that can be best described and represent as "glass ceiling".

## **2.4 Demographic factors**

According to the analysis done by the Aminah Md. Yusof (2012), shows that there has been an increasing trend for graduate intake, enrolment and output in Malaysia. A significant increase was recorded annually from starting from the year 2002. Access to the graduate studies enhanced by flexible modes of study, such as distance learning, modular approach, and research mode either full time or part time.

Religions are one of the factors that can hinder women's intention to enter top management. The fact that Malays are Muslim may have limited the rate of participation of Malay in the economy (Omar, 2004).

One important Islamic guideline that may work against women in the workplace is the restriction on free contact between the sexes (Omar, 2004). Some extremist as is evident in Afghanistan, strongly feel that it is *haram* (forbidden) for a women even to talk to men who are not blood related. Such views are based on the notion that women's voice (Khattab, 1996) and face (Tayeb, 1997) may be attractive to men and hence may lead to men's corruption.

Thus misunderstanding the concept of certain individual regarding women as a leader in management had limiting their participation in top management.

## **2.5 Family Commitment**

In terms of family responsibilities, women may be disadvantages beyond a certain level in the hierarchy where they are expected to give 100% commitment to the organization (Mavin, 2001). As a result stated from Kelly and Marin (1998) found that, most organizations will look less favorably to hire and offer married women to hold a post in top management positions than those who are single.

As Kang and Rowley postulated as cited by Omar (2004), the 'choices' are limited: (1) leave after childbirth, (2) take on temporary or part-time jobs or (3) give up on marriage and childbirth. Therefore, many women who are executives and those in elite occupations handle these problems by making choices between their career advancement and family, such as "opting out" or postponing their marriage and parenting (Blair-Loy, 2001).

According to Keene and Reynolds (2002), because of family and job responsibilities, women managers are at a disadvantage since family needs more attention thus women managers are forced to avoid overtime. This idea had supported that women are not involved in their jobs as much as men are.

## **2.6 Family Support**

The participation of married women in the labor market largely based on getting help from family members or doing it by themselves, rather than relying on policy schemes in Korea

(Sung, 2003). This raises the issue of how women reconcile paid and unpaid work and how state policy responds to this issue.

## **2.7 Negative Stereotype**

Women are considered unsuitable for senior management due to the assumptions that they were different characteristics that affected their leadership. Achievement orientation, forcefulness and strengths in decision-making are the attributes that are regularly suited to males and these characteristics are considered as the essential in fulfilling the managerial roles (Gray, 2001).

They stressed that although women had gained many achievements, negative attitudes and stereotyping women managers are still exist in many cultures of the organizations. They believes that a common stereotype is “think manager, think male”, which means success in a male characteristics. When a women employee prefers to collaborate with male boss rather than female boss, it supports the continuity of the common stereotype of “thinks manager, think male” assumptions (Schein, 1996).

## **2.8 Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture also can become one of the major challenges that have an important impact for women to enter top management. Women’s has mention that unwelcoming organizational culture as one of the main barriers they are facing in contributing in workplace (Wohlbold & Chenier, 2011).

## **2.9 Workplace Arrangement**

According to Subramaniam et. al (2010) The increasing trend of women’s participation in the labor force, particularly in the modern sector of the economy has various implications on women's work as well as their role in the family relating to childcare. To be able to juggle work and home, alternative working arrangements have become a necessity to ensure that work and family life does not become incompatible. This leads us to wonder whether more flexible working arrangements might be one method to help women and society reconcile paid work with social obligations.

# **3. Research Methods**

## **3.1 Data Source**

Primary data collection was necessary in determining challenges that hinder women to enter top management positions. Questionnaires were designed to know about the perception of working women’s in the society as to how they feel about the challenges that will hinder women’s to entrance to top management positions . A pilot test was conducted prior to actual survey in order to get clear and attainable data based on questionnaire. By this general question, about 30 respondents will randomly choose as a sample size for the pilot test. Pilot test were conducted for several reasons where in this study pilot test will provides the researchers with ideas, approaches and clues that may not have foreseen before conducting the test. Such ideas and clues would help to increase the chances of getting clearer findings in the main study (Day, 1979). Out of the 400 targeted respondents taken from Malaysian women’s who working in Klang Valley, 300 filled in

and returned the questionnaires giving a response rate of 75%. Some characteristics of the sample respondents are shown in Table 1.

Of the 300 respondents who participated in this study, a high proportion were in the youngest age group of 19 to 29 years old, are married and most of them are Bumiputera. The educational level of them shows that most of them had attained a minimum of eleven years of schooling and majority of them possess at least a STPM/Diploma (30%) and majority of them (47%) have a bachelor degree. In addition, Malaysia is a country that has different types of ethnic where the main ethnic communities are Bumiputera that includes Malay and non-Malay, Chinese and Indian. Majority of women in this study are Bumiputera that constitute 65%, Chinese and Indian which represent 19% and 16% respectively.

A majority of the respondents are working from the private sector working area (75%) and the remaining was working in public sector (25%). Most of the women were concentrated in administrative and secretarial positions (35%) followed by retail and customer service (18%) and professional positions (17%). There were less women working as managers or senior officers and this could be because of the majority of respondents are young and because of the majority of them are fresh entry into the labor force based on age profile. The lowest number of area specialization was in skilled trades that constitute only 1%.

From Table 1 shows that the household income from other resources and personal income they earned is divided into three main categories i.e. low, middle and high income. Although the number of women who possess tertiary education are higher and most of them work in administrative and secretarial job, majority of them still earned less than RM 5,000 and only a few of them earned more than RM 7,000 i.e.59% and 27% respectively each.

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample  
(Source: Based on the sample survey)

	<b>Variables (n=300)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Age ( Minimum = 19, Maximum = 55)	< 30	163	54
	30-40	115	38
	>40	22	7
Ethnicity	Bumiputera	196	65
	Chinese	56	19
	Indian	48	16
Education Achievement	Below SPM	2	1
	SPM	46	15
	STPM/Diploma	90	30
	Degree	142	47
	Post Graduate	20	7
Working sector	Private sector	225	75
	Government sector	75	25

Job category	Manager or senior officer	47	16
	Professional	52	17
	Associate Professional & Technical	27	9
	Administrative & Secretarial	104	35
	Skilled trades	3	1
	Personal services	12	4
	Retail & Customer service	55	18
Marriage status	Married	175	58
	Single	125	42
Total household income	Low income (below RM 2,000)	42	14
	Middle income (RM 2,001-RM 5,000)	177	59
	High income (Above RM 5,000)	80	27
Total personal income	Low income (below RM 2,000)	112	38
	Middle income (RM 2,001-RM 5,000)	171	57
	High income (Above RM 5,000)	16	5

## 3.2 Measures

### 3.2.1 Independent variables

The independent variables were examined from personal and employers challenges. The personal challenges were examined by three domains that are demographic factors, family commitment and family support whereas the employers challenges were examined in negative stereotypes, organizational cultures, workplace arrangement and career advancement opportunities. All these items were adapted from Subramaniam (2011), Jayakrishnan (2013), Njiru (2013) and Still (1997).

The respondents were asked, “In your opinion, what are the main reasons that prevent women from progressing in the workplace or getting to the top of their careers?”. Their responses were based on a given 7 option that represent the most factors that influenced women’s career progression in the workplace. The degree of their emphasis on women’s prevention on career progression was then averaged by calculating the frequency across the number of items for each reasons selected by them.

### 3.2.2 Dependent variables

In the absence of objective to measure women’s do have intention to enter top management, simple question were asked, and “Do you have any intentions to enter top management positions

as your career advancement”. This questions do need them to provide either they have intentions (YES) or didn’t have any intentions to enter top management (NO).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The main questions that this paper seeks to answer are the factors that challenge women towards career progression to top management.

Increase in women’s educational level had become important factors that contribute into the increasing number of women participation in labor force in Malaysia. Education attainment is an essential to the women’s living of standard improvement and at the same time allow them to take more actively in the decision making process within family, community, workplace and also in political area (Masayu et al., 1990). Women had represent 65% of students in institute of higher learning in Malaysia. Women tend to go to school because the challenges in the labor market are very competitive and push them to have higher education level (Yakubu, 2010).

In order to find out whether women who are currently working have intention to enter top management and whether all of these variables may have an affect towards women decisions, simple questions were asked to respondents in order to identify the number of respondents who interested to enter top management. As Table 2, shows number of women’s that have intention to enter top management.

Table 2: Intentions to Enter Top Management

<b>Intentions to enter top management</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
No	22
Yes	78
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

In order to examine the factors that prevent women’s intention to enter top management, first we will identify the main reasons for women’s intention to enter top management.

Table 3: Reason for Women’s Career Progression

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
To have economic independence	221	74
To support family	56	19
To have a sense of achievement	16	5
Ambitious person	7	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

The objectives of this paper were aimed to answer which challenges that will highly affect women to enter top management. In order to answer this objective, descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation analysis will conducted by selecting several questions that best represents the challenges women’s faced.



Overall reason for women career advancement is due to the increases in women's educational level (refer Table 1) where majority of respondents possesses secondary education and tertiary education. Education is essential to the improvement of living standard and allows them to make a decision to improve their economic independence through career advancement. As human capital theory discussed before state that by having higher education, people will get a better job opportunities offer and it will increase the income or salary received by them.

However, several factors are identified as problems faced by working women in Malaysia. Table 4 shows the challenges that prevent women from progressing in the workplace or getting to top of their careers. Majority of respondents tend to choose having childcare/family responsibilities as the main reason that prevent career progressing (42%), followed by gender discrimination (24%) and lack of support from husband (11%). These problems faced by women will limits the women's access to have a better promotion and job offering in the organization.

Table 4: Reason Prevent Women to Enter Top Management

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Having childcare/ Family responsibilities	241	42
Gender discrimination at workplace	137	24
Lack of support from husband	65	11
Fixed working hours	48	8
Lack of support from family	33	6
Low salary	28	5
Unavailability of Flexible Working Arrangement (FWA)	18	3
Others	4	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>574</b>	<b>100</b>

As women juggle many roles of responsibilities not only at workplace but also as a mother, daughter and wife they will tend to stay at current position without any progression in order to have time to spend with their own family. In addition, the organizations would require their managers to be flexible to the needs of business. When family demands are concerns, ambitious women need to make a better decision between family and works where as a result they will not enter top management to avoid conflict between family and work.

Besides that, women would not enter top management in order to have more time to spend with family. Most women would avoid spending more time for job in order to have quality time to spend together with their family and children. It had been supported by the previous study where women manages are at disadvantages since family needs more attention, thus they will avoid doing overtime (Kang and Reynolds, 2002). Thus, this idea had supported that women are not involved more in top positions management as much as men are.

Women also would not enter top management due to the gender discrimination that they face in a workplace. Gender discrimination might arise in many ways such as promotion-received payment they earned and treatment among co-workers in the organizations. Table 5 shows the mean value for women perception towards organizational cultural in their organizations. These factors included in order to determine whether organizational cultural factors affect their

intentions to enter top management. The mean value shows most of the factors have mean 3.00 and above. It indicates that most of women have answered agreed to the factors given and there is organizational cultural factors affect their intentions to enter top management where they will have an intentions to enter top management when they are feel accepted and treated well in the organizations. Women's that feel secured and feel accepted in the organization will have a confidence to go to top management and become a leader in the organizations.

Table 5: Mean Score on Organizational Culture

No	Perception on organizational cultural	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	The cultural and emotional climate of the organization is generally positive and supportive.	3.02	0.513
2.	I feel more secure.	3.05	0.534
3.	I have positive relationship with my co-workers	3.31	0.555
4.	My co-workers treat me with respect.	1.96	0.188

However, the mean score shows that even though they are treated equally as a member in the workplace, but they still did not get enough respect from the co-workers individually as women. From the previous interviews, they also found that although women are readily accepted in a top management as a leader in the workplace, they still experience prejudices as they were climbing into the managerial hierarchy (Omar, 2004).

Thus, from all the analysis shows that workplace environment and culture plays an important role in order to encourage women to enter top management. From the results shows assert that women in this study generally received encouragement from their superior and relationship between them were usually good. As women continue to make strides in the workforce, it is important that they are equipped to succeed and have equal opportunities for advancement. When thinking about establishing a career path it is important for individuals and organizations to establish relationships with one another.

Women have few opportunities for their career advancement in terms of promotions, training and for personal purpose (e.g.: maternity leave or paternal leave) that keep them from entering top management. Structural barriers that make it difficult to combine work and family also constrain women's promotional opportunities. Table 6 shows the analysis regarding the career advancement opportunities that women received in their workplace.

Table 6: Career Advancement Opportunities

No.	Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation
1.	All interview panels include at least one woman	2.90	0.761
2.	Employees on maternity leave/paternal leave and other leave are kept informed of vacancies or other opportunities within the institution	2.95	0.822
3.	Women are encouraged to undertake management/supervisory training	2.85	0.802

Findings show the mean value for women perception towards selection, promotion, recruitment, transfer and training offer in their organizations. These factors included in order to determine

whether there are glass ceiling barriers occurred in their workplace. The mean value shows most of the factors have mean 2.70 and above. It indicates that there is problem of glass ceiling happened in workplace that hinders their intention to enter top management regarding promotion, training, opportunities and benefits in workplace. Previous results show that women have a good relationship with their co-workers and supervisor in a workplace. However, they appeared to be sex differential with regard to training they received. The chances for promotion depends on the individuals capabilities through training provided by the organizations, but results shows that this chances are more open for the male workers.

Jobs that lack of family sensitive employee benefits, such as maternity leave, paternity leave and child care constitute another barrier to women's intention to enter top management as they try to combine jobs with the needs of their families. From previous research conducted shows that women in middle manager in Malaysia still face glass ceiling their working environment that inhibits women promotion to top management and entails several barriers such as lack of organizational support that includes networking, mentoring and family friendly initiatives (Dimovski et al., 2010).

From the analysis conducted shows that only demographic factors, family commitment, organizational cultural and career advancement opportunities have a significance relationship with women's intention to enter top management. Therefore, it can be concluded that the glass ceiling problems that hinder women's intention to enter top management comes from both factors; either it is personal challenges or from the workplace challenges.

## **5. Conclusion and Future Research**

From the findings of this study conclude that personal and employers challenges are the main reason that influences women's intention to enter top management, either it does give positive influence or it will discourage them from career progression. The difficulty of balancing work and family life also results in higher degrees of influence towards career progression. The findings reveal that Flexible Working Arrangement policies have been defined by the women as an arrangement that designed to support them to handle balancing the demands of work and family.

Family commitment is another challenge that would hinder women's intention to enter top management as they need to take care of their children and parents alone. The evidence suggests that the key barriers are around the corporate culture and the support for parents to balance childcare responsibilities with their own work. Thus, women and men should share the same responsibilities in take care of children and their parents.

This study was not short of its limitations. Further research should look bigger sample size as compared to this study. In addition, as mentioned earlier, this study only focuses on the Klang Valley area in Malaysia , therefore this study cannot represent the whole Malaysia and it might be difficult for future researcher in getting data or information from this research since it not cover the another area in Malaysia. Apart from that, the variables been used in this research does not cover all the factor affecting women's intention to enter top management in Malaysia. The

researcher only focusing several part of the variable and the other variable can still be used in determining factor be contribute to women's intention to enter top management in Malaysia.

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