

Female Leadership in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges*

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Abstract

The lack of females in top management positions at the decision-making level in the Malaysian public sector. This study discusses the issues and challenges women face at the top leadership level in the Malaysian public sector and aims to explore the issues and challenges faced by female civil servants in decision-making roles through a qualitative and quantitative lens. The sequential exploratory mix design involved 456 female public sector executives at Grade 48 and above in 23 ministries in the Federal Territory of Putrajaya, Malaysia. The qualitative data highlighted three main themes, namely gender stereotypes, social roles, and the male management model. The quantitative data revealed that the challenges posed by gender stereotypes and male management models exceeded those posed by social roles in terms of intensity. This means that female civil servants in Malaysia continue to face issues and challenges pertaining to gender stereotypes and male management models. Society continues to perceive decision-making leadership positions as less suitable for women. This study has implications for the strength of the trait leadership theory in which female leadership characteristics can be polished once issues are identified and addressed. A series of programs must be implemented so that challenges resulting from gender stereotypes and male management models can be reduced, therefore, ensuring the achievement of goals of the National Women's Policy by 2030.

Key words

Gender stereotypes, social roles, male management models, top leadership, female leadership

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Introduction

Women were once considered fit to only manage the household. Now, in line with the development of women's capabilities in both the education and economic sectors, they have successfully made great strides in the employment sector (Hamzah, Hamzah, Othman, & Devi, 2016). The number of highly educated and skilled women has increased globally (Koburtay & Syed, 2019; United Nations, 2017). This has led to an increase in the number of women in the workplace, across all levels, even though the unemployment rate among female graduates still remains high (Aun, 2020). Working women receive lower salaries than their male counterparts for the same work. The number of women in leadership positions is low (Hamzah et al., 2016; Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). Eagly and Karau (2002) and Jeong and Harrison (2017) found that the number of women at the decision-making level was low and identified the barriers women encounter in seeking to hold such high positions. Such barriers are usually known as gender stereotyping.

Prejudice against women leaders arises when they are judged based on gender beliefs and social perceptions rather than on their skills and abilities (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). The public belief and faith that a leader should have certain traits or attributes leads to gender stereotypes with respect to leadership, where masculine traits are considered more suitable for a leader (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Eagly, 1987; Lyness & Heilman, 2006).

Schein (1973) examined gender stereotypes among middle-class leaders and showed that faith and belief in the "think manager—think male" ideology were strong. Schein (1973, 1975) and Rhee and Sigler (2015) reported that both male and female managers agreed that the characteristics of a successful manager were more likely to be exhibited by men. Later, Schein, Mueller, Lituchy, and Liu (1996) examined management students of different genders from China and Japan and found that the ideology of "think manager—think male" occurred in both countries. All male and female students from both countries associated successful leaders with masculine characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors (Schein et al., 1996). They compared their results with those of studies conducted in the US, the UK, and Germany using the same instruments, methods, and samples and found that the "think manager—think male" ideology prevails globally. Some theoretical bases and the prevalence of some cultures that value gender stereotyping further support these scholarly arguments (Priyashantha, De Alwis, & Welmillia, 2021). Meanwhile, Vo (2017) in his study also found that the mindset of "think manager—think male"

still exists among the employees of the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. Further revealed that female participants in this study viewed both women and men were quite similar to successful managers while male participants perceived women were different from successful managers.

Women in the Eyes of the Global Society

Women's leadership is not valued enough by society. This is a view not only among men but also among some women, who generally lack confidence and prefer not to have women leaders. Emotions, aggressive attitudes, and irrationality in decision-making are exaggerated causes for this perspective, as people do not have confidence and faith in the ability of women to serve in decision-making positions (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018).

Data from the Public Service Department (2020) show that the increase in women's participation in the employment sector in Malaysia began in 1997 and continued until 2019. Men held more positions that ranged from Grades 1 to 40 from 1995 to 2007. Since 2008, the number of female employees has exceeded that of male employees. The number of male employees in management and professional positions (Grades 41 to 54) exceeded that of females from 1995 to 2000. This changed from 2001 to 2019 when the number of female employees exceeded that of males (Public Service Department, 2020). However, in top management positions, that is, Grade JUSA C and above, the number of female employees was far behind that of males (Public Service Department, 2020). This is very surprising because the grade increase for female employees seems to be very slow when compared to male employees.

This is also in line with the findings of Mohamed (2012), who noted that, as of 2011 in Malaysia, 26.32% of women were in the public, private, and business sectors and that 24.3% were Senate Members, 8% were State Assemblymen, 32.2% were in top management positions, 60.9% were professionals, and 6.2% were in the private and business sectors (Mohamed, 2012). Although the high numbers in the public sector, especially in top management roles and professional positions are rather encouraging, the number of women is still small when compared to that of men. The question of why women do not dominate or share the same number of top management positions with men in the public sector remains unanswered, even though the number of female employees is more than that of males. Thus, this study aims to (i) identify the issues and challenges faced by female civil servants in decision-making positions in the public sector in Malaysia, and (ii) measure

the level of each of these issues and challenges.

Barriers and Limitations of Having Women in Decision-Making Positions

The involvement of Asian women in the highest levels of leadership is considered extremely challenging because of religious beliefs, customs, traditions, and cultural factors that act as determinants of the positions and roles of women in their daily lives (Cho, Kang, & Park, 2017b). O'Leary and Flanagan (2001) showed that cultural factors are one of the causes of the imbalance in the number of women holding leadership positions. The role of women in the workforce is associated with good quality work; however, in Asia, their energy and effort as human capital remain underutilized and underdeveloped. Although the participation of Asian women in economic and political activities in recent times has improved their social status and leadership skills, the shackles of tradition and culture in the family and social norms remain (Cho, Ghosh, Sun, & Mclean, 2017a). In Malaysia, women face different challenges and experiences in handling leadership based on unique values, traditions, and customs that stem from ethnic and religious differences in society (Ramli & Hassan, 2009).

In most Asian countries, the role of women as mothers and wives is still firmly retained as a basic task (Kim, 2013); Malaysia is no exception. A large number of women have to juggle their responsibilities as mothers, wives, and housekeepers with their workplace duties. Work-life balance is a major challenge that affects the ability of women in fulfilling various commitments in their lives, especially in Malaysia (Zaimah, Sarmila, Selvadurai, Lyndon, Er, & Jamian, 2013). Although men and women prioritize their families in equal measure in Malaysia, women are often considered the ones that prioritize their family lifestyle rather than their career advancement (Marican, Ali, & Nawi, 2009).

Most women in Malaysia who are married and pursue full-time careers have to bear twice the responsibility when compared to men (Hamzah, 2017). Meanwhile, senior managers from both sectors hold similar family responsibilities and obtain the support of either their maids, helpful husbands or extended family (Mokhtar, 2020). This helps senior women to encounter the challenge of combining work and family commitments. According to Voydanoff (2005), when a woman faces increasing job demands, she will experience conflicts between her family and career, and this can affect her career performance. This is increasingly critical when women have young children, as they have to balance their role as mothers with their workplace responsibilities (Lopez-Claros & Zahidi, 2005). When there is a

conflict between family and career demands, some women cope successfully by drawing on the support of their husbands and families, and thus enjoy the opportunity to improve their careers (Brett & Stroh, 2003). However, a handful of female managers choose to pay full attention to their families rather than their careers and tend to retire or resign at a very young age (Blair-Loy, 2001; Nelson & Burke, 2000). Failing to succeed in achieving a work-life balance forces women to withdraw from the world of work (Cho et al., 2017b). This leads to the reduction in the number of women in the workplace and limits the opportunities available for women to occupy top management positions (OECD, 2016).

Jogulu and Wood (2008) conducted a cross-cultural study to compare women's attitudes and participation in the workplace among middle-level leaders in Malaysia and Australia and found that commitment and responsibility to the family were major challenges that constrained women from developing their careers. Women face several challenges in their pursuit of leadership positions. Of these, gender stereotypes and negative prejudices toward their roles and abilities as leaders are most significant. Family commitments constitute a major challenge that prevent women from advancing their careers. Jogulu and Woods's (2008) findings were strengthened by the results of another study conducted by Subramaniam and Arumugam (2013) on the barriers of career advancement among female mid-level managers in the Government Linked Agency (GLC) and its branches. Their study showed that negative perceptions of women's abilities as leaders and/or top-office bearers of organizations emerged from family-related barriers, negative stereotypes, and discrimination in the form of the "glass ceiling"—the metaphorical barrier that women encounter as they make progress toward becoming leaders. Lim, Tan, and Yin-Fah (2013) pointed out two main obstacles preventing women from pursuing their careers beyond a certain point, namely, time allocated for their families and the lack of support and guidance from the organization. The challenges and obstacles that hinder women from developing their careers have a huge impact on their skills, and the potential of highly educated women cannot be fully utilized, which reduces their chances of being selected to occupy top leadership positions in an organization (Cho et al., 2017a).

Bass, Avolio, Jung, and Berson (2003), Mostafa (2005), and Subramaniam and Arumugam (2013) studied gender stereotypes as barriers to women's career advancement and found that most women agreed that, although they had managed to achieve some career progress, the culture of negative attitudes and stereotypes toward women managers continued to exist in both their organizations and society at large. The "think manager—think male" syndrome is still ongoing, given that

there are women who prefer to work or collaborate with male superiors rather than with female ones. This is in line with the findings of Schein et al. (1996). Stereotypical views such as “women are unsuitable for leadership roles” were examined as early as in 1998 by Lewis and Fagenson-Eland, followed by Carli and Eagly in 2016. Both studies conveyed the idea that women are seen as passive and highly emotional people and that these factors made them unsuitable for decision-making roles when compared to their male counterparts, who are synonymous with self-confidence and little emotion (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Lewis & Fagenson-Eland, 1998). Several literature reviews have shown that female leaders are often described as emotional, collaborative, flexible, facilitative, sensitive, and motherly (Clisbee, 2005; Reynolds, 2002).

The stereotype that men are the ideal candidates and suited for leadership roles is one of the barriers to women occupying leadership positions. The notion that a leader must have masculine characteristics has created major gaps and put women at a disadvantage (Oakley, 2000). Masculine traits associated with leadership roles include dominant traits, autonomy, assertiveness, and stability (Koenig et al., 2011). Thus, to meet the needs of contemporary leadership, women must have masculine (dominant, assertive, and competitive) and feminine (collaborative, cooperative, and caring) traits in, what is known as, an “Androgynous Identity” (Subramanian, Irudayaraj, & George, 2016).

Methods

This study was conducted on a group of female civil servants in top management positions by combining qualitative and quantitative methods as a sequential study design. The qualitative study began through interviews to identify the issues and challenges faced by female decision-makers serving in the Malaysian public sector. Five leadership experts and policymakers were interviewed and thematic analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti software. This research tool was used for the process of coding and analyzing the data transcripts to identify themes from the participants' point of view. These findings can answer the first objective of this study, which is to identify the construct/theme of issues and challenges faced by female civil servants as decision-makers in the Malaysian public sector.

The quantitative method involved the use of questionnaires to obtain answers in order to achieve the first objective of this study. It also aimed to clarify the qualitative findings. Questionnaire items were constructed and tested for validity and reliability using the Rasch model. The results showed that the value of the ac-

cepted reliability index was good (0.99). Based on Bond and Fox (2015), a reliability index value of above 0.70 is considered a good value. This instrument underwent multiple validations such as content and construct validity through the Rasch model. The pilot studies showed that it had good psychometric properties.

The respondents were a group of female civil servants in top management positions (Grade 48 and above) across 23 ministries in the Federal Territory of Putrajaya, Malaysia. A total of 456 respondents from among 2002 female civil servants with Grade 48 ranks and above constituted the sample through a simple random sampling method. The sample size was determined based on Krejcie and Morgan's Table (1970). The location, that is, the Federal Administrative Center was chosen as it has the largest population of female civil servants (Public Service Department, 2020). The data obtained were analyzed descriptively using SPSS Version 25.0.

Two sets of research instruments were used. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative findings. Second, a questionnaire was prepared in order to gather quantitative data. To ensure that both instruments were valid and reliable, face and content validation was performed by 10 experts. Then, a total of 10 experts were appointed consisting of language, professional and industry experts. In order to meet face validity, a total of two experts were appointed from the fields of Malay and English. While for content validity, a total of eight professional experts have been appointed consisting of four leadership experts and four psychometric experts. Professional experts are selected based on the criteria of having expertise in the field and the highest academic qualification (Doctor of Philosophy), having served (university/ school/ department), and having experience in the field for more than 15 years. For the qualitative method, external validation was conducted through "expert checking," where the interview protocol was analyzed by experts to examine the suitability of the questions. The quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to ensure clear findings (Merriam, 1998). Interview data were validated by the participants through "member checking" in order to ensure that the participants agreed that the analysis was performed accurately. While data reliability is established through a process that is transparent and "rigorous" so that item reporting accurately measures the female leadership instrument developed.

Finally, based on the analysis, the Cronbach's alpha (reliability) of the instrument is 0.98, meaning the instrument is reliable and can be used. The reliability result for all items exceeds Cronbach's alpha value ranging from 0.80 to 0.98. This reliability value has met the value suggested by Pallant (2008) who states that a

good measuring tool has a reliability coefficient value of more than 0.60.

Results

RQ1 What are the Issues and Challenges Faced by Women at the Decision-Making Level?

Based on the results of the interviews conducted, three themes were identified as constructs to determine the issues and challenges faced by women decision-makers. The analysis for each emerging theme is as follows:

Main Theme: Gender Stereotypes

The second first issue pertained to gender stereotypes. Respondent A explained this as follows:

So, that other thing that women are not willing to do and when people insult, they can't stand it. So, only a few manage to go to the top. This is the situation in the public sector.

These findings are in line with those of Abdallah and Jibai (2020) who found that the small number of women at the leadership level is the result of stereotypical attitudes toward them. The existing system in the workplace does not favor them by taking the view of Respondent B.

But when I can't do it, I can't do anything, in the end I have to go underground. That's our problem right now. We share good decision-making but our system is not good enough for you moving forward.

Cullen and Murphy (2018) also pointed this out when they found that there were inequalities in the implementation of an organization's policies between women and men.

Main Theme: Social Role

The second major issue pertained to challenges emanating from social roles as women are seen as disinterested in being leaders when they are not willing to take any risks in decision-making. This was stated by Respondent D:

This is what we say, that a woman, when there is a high risk, does not want to take responsibility. That's the one I saw in the Inland Revenue Board. They (women) do not want to hold superior positions because it involves so many risks.

Chen and Houser (2017) found that a woman's ability or capability to lead will increase if she is willing and ready to lead. Women are also seen to be more concerned with family than career (Kim, 2013). As Respondent B stated:

She has to be good at work-life balance. Work-life balance in terms of her professionalism with his family. Because of women, she needs to know that she has a family to take care of as well.

This statement is consistent with the findings of Zaimah et al. (2013) and Cho et al. (2017b), who noted that work-life balance is particularly important for women and that most Asian women prioritize family over other areas of life.

Main Theme: Male Management Model

The third main theme was the predominance of the male management model. These findings show that women must work harder to prove to their superiors that they are capable of being strong leaders. As Respondent C (female) stated:

Superiors always seem indifferent if there is a position at the top level. They already have potential candidates... men... women they are not sure. That is why I once said to them, Dato' let me try for only three months. Then if I cannot do my job as well as the director, Dato', you can take me out.

The findings of this interview resonate with those of Evans (2014), who examined women's leadership and found that women receive less attention and guidance from their superiors. The management often prioritizes male employees in filling vacant positions within the organization. If a woman wants a particular position, she has to work harder to gain the trust of her superiors, who are often men. This is one of the reasons women are less likely to be selected as leaders (Cho et al., 2017a).

RQ2 What are the levels of issues and challenges faced by female decision-makers in Malaysia?

The data analysis for this research question was a continuation of that for RQ1. The findings for RQ2 show that the issues and challenges that women face in holding positions at the decision-making level are moderately high. Table 1 presents this. Gender stereotypes and male management models had medium to high mean scores, whereas the social role dimension had a medium low mean score. The interpretation of the mean score to identify this level is made based on the interpretation table of Tajolosa (2020), which is equivalent to a mean score of 1.00–1.50 (Low); 1.51–2.50 (Medium Low); 2.51–3.50 (Medium High); and 3.51–4.00 (High). Thus, assumptions regarding the opportunity of women to hold positions at the decision-making level are still moderate. Table 1 shows that female civil servants in Malaysia face various obstacles when they seek to position themselves as decision-making leaders in the public sector in Malaysia.

Table 1
Women's Issues and Challenges

No.	Dimensions of Issues and Challenges	Mean	SD	Level
1	Gender Stereotype	2.56	0.71	Medium High
2	Social Role	2.21	0.65	Medium Low
3	Male Management Model	3.01	0.59	Medium High
	Overall	2.59	0.44	Medium High

These findings support studies like Lyness and Heilman (2006) and Carli and Eagly (2016), who argued that a position as a decision maker is appropriate for a man's character (referring to the male management model). Female workers tend to treat their families as their main priority. Asian women tend to focus on their families because of the cultural norm that expects them to behave (Cho et al., 2017b; Kim, 2013; Ramli & Hassan, 2009). The issues and challenges that women as decision-makers face have different degrees of intensity. Table 2 shows the details of several factors that prevent women from enjoying leadership roles.

Table 2
Details of issues and challenges

No.	Item	SDA (%)	DA (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
Women's Stereotypes					
1	The presumption that men are better leaders than	18.6	30.3	29.8	21.3

	women lessens the chances for women to be chosen as leaders.				
2	Gender discrimination is the major cause for the lack of women leaders in our country today.	6.8	35.7	35.2	22.8
3	Women leaders do not get enough support from their organizations toward career development.	10.3	35.7	33.8	20.2
4	Women cannot influence decision-makers.	37.7	46.7	11.8	3.7
5	The stereotypical view that women are not brave enough to take risks prevents them from accessing opportunities to occupy higher positions.	20.2	37.9	29.2	12.7
Social Roles					
6	Not many women are interested in taking up decision-making roles.	21.5	37.1	31.4	10.1
7	Women are more concerned about child-bearing rather than pursuing their careers.	18.4	38.2	28.9	14.5
8	Women are not willing to spend more time at the office.	19.5	37.9	30.5	12.1
9	The lack of family support forces women to hesitate to expand their careers.	20.6	39.5	29.6	10.3
10	Women are not resilient enough to be leaders.	45.8	40.8	11.0	2.4
Male Management Model					
11	Women have to work harder than men to prove that they can be leaders.	5.7	24.3	36.2	39.5
12	The lack of mentorship is a cause for the dearth of women in leadership positions.	7.9	33.6	36.8	21.7
13	Women leaders are just as good as (or better than) men when it comes to being empathetic.	2.9	13.2	45.4	38.6

Note: SDA -Strongly Disagree; DA - Disagree; A - Agree; SA - Strongly Agree

Table 2 shows that female employees did not agree with Items 4–10. As many as 84.4% of female employees disagreed with Item 4, “*Women are unable to influence decision-makers.*” They considered themselves capable of performing tasks and acting as decision-makers. Further, 59.8% did not agree with Item 5, “*The stereotypical view that women are not brave enough to take risks prevents them from accessing opportunities to occupy higher positions.*” This means that the assumption that women are not brave and avoid taking risks, consequently losing out on opportunities to hold high positions, is not true.

These findings contradict those of previous studies like Croson and Gneezy (2009) and Eckel and Grossman (2003) who stated that women are “risk-averse.” However, our findings are in line with the study conducted by Maxfield, Shapiro, Gupta, and Hass (2010) on 600 female managers who were shown to be risk-takers. Item 5 is related to Items 1, 2, and 3. Women are not given the oppor-

tunity to hold high positions not because they do not dare to take risks, but because of the assumption that male leaders are better than female ones (Item 1) and the persistence of gender discrimination has always resulted in fewer women being selected as decision-makers. Such gender stereotypes will remain in societies that continue to adhere to the notion that only a man or a person with masculine traits can be a good leader (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). This finding is also in line with Abdallah and Jibai (2020) who showed that one of the reasons for the small number of women at the leadership level is the stereotypes against women and the lack of implementation of gender equality within organizations (Cullen & Murphy, 2018).

The fact that women do not receive enough organizational support for their career advancement (Item 3) also prevents them from becoming leaders. As Table 2 shows, 54% of the respondents agreed with Item 3, “*Women leaders do not get enough support from their organizations toward career development.*” Singh-Manoux, Guéguen, Ferrie, Shipley, Martikainen, Bonenfant, Goldberg, and Marmot (2008) and Billing (2011) showed that women do not have sufficient experience in leadership roles and this is a causal factor for the small number of women in leadership positions. This occurs when there are only a handful of top leaders who prioritize gender in their recruitment and promotion processes (Peterle & Rau, 2017; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Régner, Thinus-Blanc, Netter, Schmader, & Huguet, 2019). Such situations prevent women from pursuing their careers. Women are not given opportunities to develop their careers because the management treats certain positions as exclusive to men (Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; Chin, 2018).

As many as 86.6% of the respondents disagreed with Item 10, “*Women are not resilient enough to be leaders,*” implying that women are competent and capable of being leaders. Only a few women (under 50%) agreed to Item 6 “*Not many women are interested in taking up decision-making roles.*” This shows that, although women believe that they are resilient, they are not entirely interested in becoming leaders when given the opportunity to do so. Chen and Houser (2017) noted that a woman’s ability or capability to lead will increase if they are willing and ready to lead. Thus, if women themselves do not want to be leaders, then their leadership abilities cannot be assessed and they will continue to be considered minorities in leadership positions. Some senior executives and top management personnel have claimed that women have no desire to excel in their current job positions. This might stem from women not having high internal motivation to position themselves as organizational leaders (Elmuti, Jia, & Davis, 2009).

A total of 56.6% disagreed with Item 7, “*Women are more concerned about child-bear-*

ing rather than pursuing their careers.” This means that women think about raising their children more than career advancement. This statement was supported by Item 8, *“Women are not willing to spend more time at the office”* which shows that women workers in Malaysia are not willing to work overtime (57.4%). Although most female civil servants stated that they were willing to spend time in the office, there were still a handful who were not willing to work overtime. This shows that there are still women who are more concerned with prioritizing their families. This statement also aligns with the percentage of women who agreed with Item 7 (43.4%), suggesting that they are more concerned with the task of raising their children than thinking about their career advancement. Zaimah et al. (2013) found that the work-life balance factor, especially among Malaysian women, is very important. Although male and female Malaysian citizens prioritize family over career, the latter are more likely to choose a more balanced lifestyle rather than prioritize career advancement alone (Hamzah, 2017; Marican et al., 2009). Support from the family is not a barrier to career advancement for female civil servants. This is evident in the fact that 60.1% disagreed with Item 9, *“The lack of family support forces women to hesitate to expand their careers.”* These findings show that family support is very important for women in high positions. Hamzah, Karjo, and Basiron (2014) found that women who are successful in their careers relied on the support of individuals close to them.

Some respondents complained that they had to work harder than men to prove themselves as capable of being leaders (Item 11). The lack of guidance from superiors also resulted in fewer women in the leadership level (item 12). Thus, a female leader who aspires to hold a high or decision-making position often needs to work harder because support and guidance from the top is hard to come by. Evans (2014) showed that the lack of guidance from superiors was one of the factors preventing women from being selected as leaders. Chuang (2019) noted that by providing training and guidance to employees regardless of their gender, their skills and abilities in management and leadership can be enhanced deeply. As many as 84% of the respondents in this study agreed with Item 13, *“Women leaders are just as good as (or better than) men when it comes to being empathetic.”*

This statement is very relevant to the study of female leadership, which treats empathy as synonymous with women and considers it a “superpower” that helps women leaders exercise effective leadership (Biçer, 2020; Kock, Mayfield, Mayfield, Sexton, & De La Garza, 2019). Therefore, female managers are often associated with empathy.

Conclusions

Issues and challenges faced by female decision-makers among civil servants in Malaysia remain major obstacles to increasing the number of women holding top-post positions. The three main obstacles are gender stereotypes, social roles, and male management models. Therefore, in order to empower women and to increase their numbers in top positions, the responsible parties such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia, need to think of solutions to tackle these issues and challenges.

Women must be trained and guided so that they can overcome all issues and challenges. They must believe in themselves and always think that they are smart and capable of managing and balancing their lives. They should not succumb to cultural beliefs that consider themselves weak. Women should not avoid taking risks or making important decisions. To empower women, several suggestions are proposed by this study. One of the proposals is to implement mentoring and coaching programs so that self-efficacy, self-confidence, and self-awareness among female civil servants can be increased. Every newly appointed female civil servant should undergo skills training that aims to shape the character of a leader. Such continuous effort can build leadership traits among female civil servants and give them confidence to take up positions as decision-makers.

The findings of this study have implications for the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, so that they can take up a more aggressive role toward developing the community for common prosperity. There is a need to increase the number of female employees in top management across all government sectors in Malaysia so that the administrative ecosystem at that level is more balanced. Policies and strategies, including the establishment of evaluation criteria for the selection of new leaders and annual performance evaluations, must be reviewed so that there is no discrimination on the ground of gender. This means that the choice and criteria for appointment as a decision maker is not the result of gender stereotypes, but rather depends on the leadership skills of the civil servant in question.

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