



# The Motivating Factors of the Muslim Female Executive Planters in Malaysian Oil Palm Plantation Industry: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Study regarding life experiences of Muslim female executive planter in Malaysia oil palm plantation sector is sparse. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the motivating factors of the Muslim female executive to continue working in oil palm plantation industry. To gain a comprehensive comprehension of the factors that motivate female executives to continue working in the oil palm plantation industry, a qualitative methodology was employed. A semi-structured interview with eight (8) female oil palm plantation workers in Malaysia was conducted. The data from the interview were analyzed using the method of thematic analysis. The findings indicated that remuneration, opportunity, exposure, and education are the factors that motivate the Muslim female planters to continue working in the oil palm plantation industry. This can enhance the overall experience of female executive planters and create equal opportunities regarding the hiring process and pay schedule.

## 1. Introduction

Malaysia's population is estimated at 32.7 million in 2020, up from 32.5 million in 2019, with a 0.4% yearly growth rate (Department of Statistics, 2020). Males also outnumbered females by a significant margin. With 16.8 million males and 15.9 million females in 2020, in both the young and working-age categories, males outnumbered females. Meanwhile, females account for 1.2 million of the elderly population, while males account for just 1.1 million in 2020. (Department of Statistics, 2020). Department of Statistics (2020) also mentioned that the country's sex ratio maintained at 106 males for every 100 females. Males tend to join the labour for a consistent monthly income, therefore agricultural activities in rural regions were typically dominated by females rather than males. Adding to this, Chen et al. (2019) found that males, rather than females, have a better chance of entering the workforce since they may readily join any sort of labour employment. Women are primarily represented by housewives who live in rural areas and grow vegetables for food and to help their husbands provide for their families. According to this study, these situations make females majority of rural agricultural activities in comparison to males, like studies by Diirro et al. (2018) and Doss (2018).

The Malaysian plantation sector is beginning to recruit more women, particularly at the executive level for positions such as assistant manager and manager of estates. Despite their significant contribution and role in oil palm plantation, females' efforts have been overshadowed by their male colleagues. According to the International Labour Organizations (2017), the current worldwide labour force participation rate for women is close to 49%. Males account for 75% of the total. That is a 26 % differential, with some areas facing a margin of more than 50% (International Labour Organization, 2017). Ellemers (2018) who states that women are less likely than males to be chosen for promotions and important jobs throughout their careers. Woods (2015) in her study on female gender inequality in defense industry describes those multiple commitments, such as juggling between work and family duties, could create situational barriers, while structural obstacles are related to the organization's culture, they are also linked to the male paradigm of leadership roles that in lines with outlined challenges by Al-Asfour et al. (2017).

Stereotypes are not always harmful since they assist individuals navigate a world that is constantly bombarding them with information. However, according to Hoyt and Murphy (2016), in terms of women and leadership, the most detrimental effects of stereotype threat are arguably the ensuing decreases in motivation and engagement. Gender stereotypes can also explain why women female employees are underrepresented in senior leadership roles while males are overrepresented (Cundiff and Vescio, 2016; Diehl, and Dzubinski, 2016). These expectations of inferiority based on stereotypes can be menacing to women and contribute to the dearth of female leaders in a variety of professions (Block, Koch, Liberman, Merriweather, & Roberson, 2011). Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the motivating factors of the Muslim female executive planters to continue working in Malaysian oil palm plantation industry.



## 2. Methodology

Using a qualitative research methodology, primary data were gathered for this study. Qualitative research collects data and gives a detailed description utilising a flexible research approach to provide a full and deep overview of an event. In order to recruit participants for this research, snowball sampling is therefore a method of convenience sampling. This method is utilized when it is difficult to recruit participants with the desired characteristics (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). In total, eight (8) participants were interviewed as showed in Table 1. Few criteria are utilized for participant selection. The criteria for inclusion and exclusion, which included gender, position, work experience, and discipline of work. Female will be selected based on the first criterion, while male will not be chosen. The position criterion was restricted to executive planter, which includes estate manager, assistant estate manager, and cadet planter. The final criterion for the sphere of employment is oil palm plantation estate. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. Afterwards, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) state that thematic analysis is a fundamental technique for qualitative analysis and that it equips the researcher with essential skills that will be useful for conducting a variety of other forms of qualitative analysis, as many of them are theme-based.

Table 1. Participant information

Participant	Age	Position	Working experience (years)
1	34	Estate manager	13
2	23	Cadet planter	1.6
3	26	Assistant manager	1.2
4	35	Assistant manager	1.6
5	26	Assistant manager	1
6	37	Assistant manager	15
7	34	Assistant manager	13
8	25	Cadet planter	1.2

## 3. Results

The theme that arises when discussing about the motivation factors that encourage the Muslim female participant to continue working the oil palm plantation is remuneration, exposure, education, and opportunity.

### 3.1 Remuneration

Most of the participants acknowledged that salary and benefits were important aspects and temptation that influenced them to venture into and continue working in oil palm plantation industry. One participant spoke about the salary is compatible with the position and responsibilities that she holds in the company:

*“I feel that the salary is compatible at least for my current position as a manager and also worth all the headache and restless days that came with the work”*

(Participant 1)

Another participant remarked that even though the salary is good, it is only applicable for those who hold executive position:

*“I do think that the salary is good enough. But I do think this only apply for us that working as management team, not the guys who are working in the field as labour”*

(Participant 2)

One person stated that she receives not only salary, but also benefit in the form on accommodation by the company that she is currently working:

*“Salary for sure. We’re getting good pay and everything else such as place to stay is taken care of by the company, so I do not have to worry about paying monthly rent”*

(Participant 3)

Another participant described that salary is the main motivation for her being in the oil palm plantation industry and express the need of the salary to be attractive:



*"The salary is very attractive. I can say that the salary is the main motivation for being in the plantation because of the dangerous nature of the work, I do think the salary need to be attractive"*

(Participant 4)

### 3.2 Exposure

In this study, it is necessary to investigate the backgrounds of female executive planter's parents to see whether they provide encouragement and exposure for the female executive in choosing career in oil palm plantation industry. The findings reveal that female executive planter came from varying family backgrounds. In relation to the family background and influence for the career motivation, four of the participants reported that their family have become their motivation in choosing the oil palm plantation industry to build their career. One participant described she felt that her career in the plantation industry was being predetermined as her father is involved in oil palm plantation industry under FELDA as a settler:

*"My father work as FELDA settler, so I think that me working in plantation industry is bound to happen one way or another because I will have to succeed my family oil palm plantation business as I am the only one that continue working in this industry. My family is a big role on why I get into plantation industry"*

(Participant 1)

Participant three described how she was hugely influenced by her family to get into oil palm plantation industry, by observing their family who also work in the same field:

*"My family does play a great influence over me, especially when I have few family members that working in estate from labour workers up to executive position"*

(Participant 3)

Participant five spoke about the influence exerted by a certain environment can manipulate one's choices or motivate someone to go that route:

*"Yes, they do work in related field. One of my cousins even have a small patch of land that he uses to plant chili by fertigation. I feel like if our environment is at a certain way, we will be easily influenced to go in the same direction"*

(Participant 5)

One participant spoke about how her father is a smallholder and how that affects her to pursue a career in oil palm plantation industry. According to her, these situation as a result helps her to adjust to new environments, which aided her career in the plantation environment:

*"Yes, my father is a smallholder and I do think that me being in a plantation environment since I was a child help increase my interest to work in plantation industry. Going into the farm, helping my father with his work, or just looking at him working help me to familiarise myself with the plantation"*

(Participant 7)

### 3.3 Education

Apart from different exposure in the form of family background and influence, education may be significant in determining important career motivation for the Muslim female executive planter in this study. Human capital theory suggests that resources invested in education and training are likely to enhance career progression for individuals (Becker, 1964).

Three participants highlighted that they have formal education either directly related to plantation industry or related to agricultural sector:

*"Yes, education in agricultural study (ISP) and I am currently studying postgraduate level in field related to plantation industry"*

(Participant 1)

*"I studied in agriculture related field, at first, I did not have any experience or formal knowledge regarding managing estate. But the company gave us adequate training before sending us to work"*



*in the estate. This is just my own opinion, but I do not think that people who does not have or lack of knowledge in agriculture field will go into plantation industry”*

*(Participant 3)*

*“I also receive scholarship in oil palm plantation during study. That influence me to work in plantation sector and even though I have no other experience in plantation sector”*

*(Participant 4)*

*“Not specific to plantation, I studied horticulture during my undergraduate study, and I think that help at least in the aspect of taking care of oil palm trees. But the management side of the plantation I learn all of it during my training period with the company”*

*(Participant 2)*

### 3.4 Opportunity

All participants highlighted that there are opportunities for them to get a promotion for better position. They described how the opportunities highly dependent on their work performance and productivities. Participant one spoke about the importance of productivity and achievement by sharing her experience regarding that matter:

*“Maybe, because it is highly depending on productivity and achievement by us. I have seen people getting promoted in short period of time because they get great achievement. I also seen people that went into retirement with the same position as when they first started working”*

*(Participant 1)*

One participant spoke about how she is hopeful that through more opportunities, she can achieve her personal goal:

*“Not really as I am still considerably new in the company, but I know that we have a female estate manager and I hope many opportunities will come for me in the future. It will be a long journey ahead, but I will try my best to achieve my goal of being a boss”*

*(Participant 2)*

Most of the participants stated that the opportunities available when working in the plantation field, can be obtained through high effort and hard work:

*“I am not sure, I just work here for little over a year, but I do believe that in plantation industry, if you do good, have great productivity, great performance, you done no trouble and very hardworking, the opportunity will present itself to you. At least that is what I believe”*

*(Participant 3)*

*“Yes, opportunity is there. If not, why am I here? When you do your work properly, do not get into trouble, do not be afraid to make mistake but you need to learn from past mistake. By doing that we open ourselves to a lot of opportunities and sometimes the opportunity is there, we just need to look for it”*

*(Participant 4)*

## 4. Discussion

The interviewees discussed the factors that motivating them to continue working in the oil palm plantation industry. The findings illustrate that the salary and benefits they gain from working as executive planter become the main drive for the participants. The finding is parallel with a statement claimed by Kamaruddin, Abdullah and Ayob (2018) that indicated the economic profitability and employee welfare package supplied by companies might boost job satisfaction among plantation employees, retaining them in the industry and perhaps attracting new workers. Other aspects of reward may have an impact on employee motivation. Furthermore, better pay leads to higher motivation among employees. As a result, strong reward systems supplied by companies would lead to employee commitment inside the company.



According to a World Bank (2013) report, Malaysian employees are highly migratory across industries, mostly to seek higher pay, and working conditions that include the use of modern technology and infrastructure. In addition, this finding supported by Loshana (2016) that stated, Pertubuhan Rapat Malaysia, a non-governmental group concentrating on labour issues, compensation is an essential factor in job selection, and a decent wage would not deter Malaysians from working in any industry. The findings suggested that family background and influence also play a vital role for most of the participants. The rationale for this is that they were the initial and most immediate career settings to which the participants were exposed, and they may have influenced their career perceptions. The finding is parallel with a study by Sharif, Ahmad and Sarwar (2019) which indicated that within eastern civilization, parents have a vital part in the formation of or influence over their child's career decisions. Furthermore, children from rural environments tend to take on their parents' jobs, whereas those from industrialised settings have greater autonomy and professional decision-making (Howard et al., 2009).

The findings indicate that the participants have a desire to improve their career as they work in the field. According to Rahman and Hoque (2014), there are five work factors that are critical for an employee's motivation. It comprises of the work itself, salary, progression prospects, supervision, and co-workers. A study by Khan, Farooq and Khan (2010) indicated that, among the most critical variables, promotion had the biggest impact on employee work motivation. While Wan, Sulaiman, and Omar (2012) stated that if promotions were issued fairly and evenly, workers would be more dedicated and loyal to the company, and the desire to leave the company would be minimal. On the other hand, it is important for oil palm plantation companies to provide rewards, both physical and in the form of recognition, to make employees pleased and to motivate their employees to perform better at work. Based on Kshirsagar and Waghale (2014), employees that lack motivation may be an issue for companies, and poor employee performance can have far-reaching consequences.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to identify the motivating factors for the Muslim female executive to continue working in oil palm plantation industry. Through a semi-structured interview, the interviewees shared the motivating factors that keep them working in this industry despite the stereotypes they received. The theme that arises when discussing about the motivation factors that encourage the participant to continue working the oil palm plantation is remuneration, exposure, education, and opportunity. This study may benefit the industry especially plantation companies that planned to increase the percentage of female employees in the future. It also can help plantation companies to understand the factors that affects their Muslim female employee experiences during work and improve the workplace sustainability. Furthermore, it helps government agencies to identify any issues regarding gender equality in the industry. This is because they are responsible to create and enforce policies and legislation to protect female workers regardless the industry they are working. Any loophole or technical defect in the policies and legislation that are related to this issue need to be identified and patch to make sure that the policies have better implementation.

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