Women Profiling in Leadership: A Case Study in Sabah

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to compile a comprehensive profile of women who participated in a study focused on women's leadership in the State of Sabah. The profile includes various details about the respondents, such as their age, length of service prior to retirement, ethnicity, religion, district of origin, marital status, education level, number of dependents, monthly income, and employment information, including the type of organization they work for and their current job grade. This study is a survey that was carried out in Sabah and targeted at management-level decision-makers who are considered professionals in both the public and private sectors. A quantitative approach was utilized in this study, with the findings being analysed using percentages. The sampling method employed was purposeful sampling, specifically selecting female employees who met the predefined criteria. Based on the findings, the majority of respondents fall within the age range of 50 to 55 years and still have more than five years of employment remaining before reaching retirement age. The respondents predominantly identify as Muslim and belong to the indigenous Kadazan Dusun ethnic groups from the Kota Kinabalu district. They are married, hold a bachelor's degree, earn a monthly income ranging between RM5,000 and RM10,000, and are employed by the state government. This profiling study helps in understanding women's representation in leadership positions. It provides role models and aspirations to inspire next-generation female leaders. By highlighting the achievements and capabilities of women leaders, organisations can contribute to changing societal perceptions and creating a more gender-equal culture. The study's findings shed light on the remarkable ability of most women leaders to effectively balance work and personal commitments, successfully integrating their leadership roles with their marital responsibilities.
Keywords: Women, Leadership, demographic factors, gender, decision making

1. Introduction

This paper is a review of women profiling study focusing primarily on women leadership. Profiling analysis on women leaders can yield invaluable insights into the experiences, challenges, and successes of women in leadership positions. It helps researchers understand the unique dynamics and barriers that women leaders face within their respective fields and industries. By analysing the characteristics and backgrounds of women in leadership, we can evaluate the representation and diversity of women leaders in various industries and sectors. According to Budrina (2012), the knowledge about the characteristics and gender disparities cannot be universally applied due to variations in political, economic, cultural, and institutional contexts among different countries. Therefore, this study aims to understand the demographic profile of women leaders specifically in Sabah, Malaysia.

2. Literature review

In both public and private organisations, women have historically been underrepresented in leadership positions and often regarded as outliers when assuming positions of authority. Female leadership is nothing new but male leaders are still far more prevalent as highlighted by Hill, Miller, Benson, and Handley (2016). Persistent gender inequality and discrimination continue to present formidable challenges for women employees, particularly those aspiring to leadership roles. Statistical data vividly illustrates the gender disparity which clearly indicates a significant predominance of males in higher-status positions in contrast to their female counterparts (Mate, McDonald and Do, 2019). To assess leadership and empowerment more effectively, there should be more women in senior roles (De Nmark,1993). Over time, women's leadership roles have undergone a significant transition. In a more recent study by Ugyen (2023), despite an increased presence of women in the civil service, the number of women occupying influential positions remains limited.

In 1990, studies began to reveal gender differences in leadership styles, portraying female managers in favourable terms as participative and democratic leaders. The efficacy of women as leaders is unequivocal, with their potential hindered not by a deficiency in capability, but rather by a dearth of opportunities. Research by Zenger and Folkman (2019) asserts that women display equal potential to excel in higher-level roles as their male counterparts, provided they are afforded equitable chances. However, the challenge for women lies in the intricate exercise of authentic leadership, as underscored by Hopkins and O'Neil (2015), due to the non-gender-neutral nature of leadership expectations.

Previous studies have demonstrated that women have the capability to excel as high performers (Baker, 2014), Additionally, they are often associated with a more transformative leadership style compared to men (Jogulu and Wood, 2006). In a recent study conducted by Othman and Hamid (2023), it was found that women in academic leadership roles exhibit a clear understanding of transformational leadership, emphasizing the significance of effective communication and decision-making skills. However, Ismail (2023) suggested that while women leaders do participate in the decision-making process, the advancement of multicultural education remains in its early stages. In the organizational study, research indicates that female executives may bring a unique blend of leadership qualities, skills, and behaviours that can positively impact their respective organizations. Meanwhile, Noor, Yew, and Yusoff (2022) highlight that millennial women are actively adapting and evolving to successfully navigate a changing world. The limited progression of women into leadership and power positions can be attributed to various factors, including the glass ceiling effect, sex role orientation, and the perception of managerial roles as male-dominated constructs. These elements collectively contribute to the underrepresentation of women in higher leadership positions. Furthermore, cultural barriers, societal expectations, the challenging decision of balancing career and family commitments (Greguletz, Diehl, and Kreutzer, 2019; Hideg and Shen, 2019), and women's own apprehensions about achieving success (Kiamba31, 2009) compound these issues.

While women executives may have certain advantages in such scenarios, they also face formidable challenges. They are tasked with the transformation of organizational cultures that have been shaped by societal biases against them (Chin, 2011). The landscape is further complicated by internal political dynamics, male dominance, insufficient access to both financial and non-financial benefits, biases from top management, negative perceptions from colleagues, lack of support, and the difficulties associated with accommodating childcare responsibilities. These organizational hurdles were highlighted in a recent study conducted by Islam, Jantan, Hunt, Hashim, and Chong (2022). The effectiveness of female leaders is influenced by the specific cultural and organizational contexts in which they operate. Previous research also emphasize how women's advancement to the top levels of management is greatly influenced by their lack of career planning and collaborative, power-sharing management styles, which are notably different from those of male managers (Chugh and Sahgal, 2007). Badrolhisam, Achim, and Omar (2022) have expressed the viewpoint that although women hold a predominant presence in academic positions within Malaysia's public higher institutions, ascending to leadership positions continues to pose a significant challenge. This challenge is linked to the prevailing patriarchal sentiment, which is particularly prominent in the government sector. In this environment, women are still commonly perceived as lacking the necessary physical, psychological, and emotional attributes for effective leadership. Women leaders' decisions to depart were not primarily influenced by work-life balance but driven by their struggle to maintain authenticity and contribute perceived value to the organization, ultimately leading them to opt for departure (Frkal and Criscione-Naylor, 2021).

Historically, women have always possessed the capability and desire to assume leadership roles. However, societal, political, and economic barriers have hindered their ability to do so. A recent study conducted by Tabassum and Rafiq (2023) sheds light on three key factors that influence women's progress in leadership positions: workplace barriers, domestic barriers, and individual-level obstacles. As circumstances have evolved, these perceived limitations have considerably eased, allowing women to attain leadership positions (Porterfield and Kleiner, 2005). Notably, studies have uncovered gender-specific factors affecting leader development and varying selection rates for male and female leaders (Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, and Burke, 2017; Aragao, 2023). Despite the challenges faced, the literature strongly suggests that a well-considered recognition of the positive dimensions of women's leadership is not only justified but also provides valuable guidance for organizations seeking to harness the advantages of a diverse workforce (Offermann and Foley, 2020). To succeed as leaders, women have often felt compelled to exhibit traditionally male traits while setting aside their feminine inclinations. This transformation is believed to enable them to align with societal norms, paving the way for their acceptance within the symbolic order and garnering divine favour (Höpfl and Matilal, 2007).

The motivations underlying networking practices are still poorly understood, despite studies showing that women's professional networks are frequently weaker and less productive than men's in terms of advantages exchanged. As such,

organisations must support women more by offering encouragement. Leaders can reassure them of their skills and motivate them to pursue advancements earlier in their careers (Zenger and Folkman, 2019; Beeson and Valerio, 2012). Kamalul-Ariffin and Ibrahim (2022) suggested that apart from support systems, digital transformation plays an important role in giving women higher potential at the managerial level and breaking the cultural stereotypical mole of women.

3. Research Methodology

The study involved a total of 282 employed women, aged between 30 and 59, located in the state of Sabah. These participants held positions as decision-makers at the management level within both the public and private sectors. Due to government-imposed COVID-19 movement restrictions, the data collection process necessitated an online approach. An online survey was conducted using Google Forms, enabling broader participation and ease of access. The survey link was disseminated to various entities, including central and state government ministries, departments, government agencies, as well as corporate bodies and government-linked companies in Sabah. This study on women's profiling was conducted using a quantitative approach, utilizing percentages to analyse the collected data. The sampling method employed was purposeful sampling, involving the deliberate selection of female employees who met the predetermined criteria. The respondent data was gathered through a structured questionnaire and divided into two distinct categories: demographics and employment. Within the demographic category, the questionnaire captured information on respondents' age, length of service before retirement, ethnicity, religious affiliation, region of origin, marital status, level of education, number of dependents in their household, and monthly gross income. The employment category, on the other hand, focused on analysing the type of organization and the current position grade of the respondents. This analysis aimed to examine the demographic background of female decision-makers within the organizational hierarchy.

4. Findings and Discussion

When examining the data by age group as shown in Table 1, it was found that the highest percentage of participants was aged 50 to 55 years (26.6%) followed by the group aged 40 to 45 years (23.8%). The lowest group is aged 56 - 59 years (5.7%) and the group of 30 years and under is 7.1%. The findings suggest that women may have reached a stage in their careers where they have accumulated the necessary experience, significant professional skills, and expertise to take on leadership responsibilities. It may also indicate that they have successfully navigated obstacles such as gender bias, work-life balance issues, and limited opportunities for career advancement. The service period before retirement is divided into 2 groups, less than 5 years and more than 5 years. The study found that the group who has more than 5 years before reaching their retirement age is 90.1% of the surveyed participants. This percentage is very significant compared to the group of less than 5 years to retire which represents 9.9%. Most women leaders with more than 5 years until retirement age implies age diversity within leadership positions. It suggests that many organizations recognize the value of diverse perspectives and are actively engaging women leaders of different age groups to contribute to decision-making processes and organizational strategies.

According to the percentage analysis, 20.2% of the surveyed participants are Indigenous Dusun ethnic, while 19.5% were Kadazan ethnic. A high proportion of the indigenous Dusun and Kadazan ethnics women leaders in this study suggests that the study has successfully captured the perspectives and leadership experiences of these specific groups. The third highest is 15.6% from the Bajau group meanwhile Malays showed the fourth highest position representing 11% and followed by the Brunei ethnic of 9.2%. Only 3.9% are represented by the Bugis, 3.5% Chinese, and 1.8% the Murut ethnic. Other races reported 15.2% of the Bisaya, Banjar, Iranun, Javanese, Sungai, Filipino/Indian, Arab, Suluk, Kedayan, Bisaya, Punjabi, Rungus and Sino Kadazan. The study provides a rich understanding of the successes of women's representation in leadership positions. Based on the demographic findings, the largest group of the survey participants identifying as Muslims represented 64.2% of the total participants. The non-Muslims were the Christian believers at 34.4%, the Buddhists at 1.1% and the lowest group the Sikhs at 0.4%. The findings suggest that women's leadership practices, decision-making, and organizational approaches may be influenced by their faith, values, and cultural norms. The study has shown that organizational policies, practices, and initiatives promote inclusivity and accommodate the needs of Muslim women leaders.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	N	%		N	%
Age Group:			*Period of service before retirement:*		
30 years & below	20	7.1	Less than 5 years	28	9.9
31 - 35	30	10.6	More than 5 years	254	90.1
36 - 39	34	12.1			
40 - 45	67	23.8	*Ethnicity:*		
46 - 49	39	13.8	Malay	31	11.0
50 - 55	75	26.6	Chinese	10	3.5
56 - 59	16	5.7	Kadazan	55	19.5
			Dusun	57	20.2
Religion:			Murut	5	1.8
Islam	181	64.2	Bajau	44	15.6
Kristian	97	34.4	Brunei	26	9.2
Buddha	3	1.1	Bugis	11	3.9
Sikh	1	0.4	Others	43	15.2
District of Origin:			*Marital Status:*		
Beaufort	8	2.8	Single	47	16.7
Keningau	5	1.8	Married	207	73.4
Kinabatangan	3	1.1	Separated	3	1.1
Kota Belud	18	6.4	Divorced	16	5.7
Kota Kinabalu	56	19.9	Balu	9	3.2
Kota Marudu	4	1.4			
Kuala Penyu	13	4.6	*Education Level:*		
Kudat	4	1.4	SPM/STPM and equivalents	14	5.0
Lahad datu	7	2.5	Diploma	19	6.7
Papar	24	8.5	Degree	157	55.7
Penampang	20	7.1	Masters	71	25.2
Pitas	1	0.4	Doctorate	21	7.4
Putatan	9	3.2			
Ranau	10	3.5	*Number of Household Dependents:*		
Sandakan	30	10.6	3 and below	190	67.4
Semporna	5	1.8	4 - 6	78	27.7
Sipitang	8	2.8	7 - 9	14	5.0
Tambunan	8	2.8	*Income:*		
Tawau	14	5.0	RM5,000 and below		
Tenom	4	1.4	RM5,001 - RM10,000	137	48.6
Tongod	2	0.7	RM10,001 - RM14,999	32	11.3
Tuaran	16	5.7	RM15,000 - RM19,999	5	1.8
Others	13	4.6	RM20,000 and above	7	2.5

The analysis revealed that most respondents resided in Kota Kinabalu city (19.9%) followed by Sandakan district (10.6%). Meanwhile, Pitas has the lowest with only 0.4%. The further away the home district of the respondents from the city, the lesser their participation at the management level due to logistical factors between urban, suburban and rural areas requiring a commitment to reside in an area closer to the state administrative centre. In addition to that, it may also indicate that these locations offer more diverse and prominent leadership positions, attracting women who are seeking career advancement and professional growth. These locations offer better infrastructure, connectivity, and access to resources, transportation networks, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and professional networks that facilitate women's participation in the study and their access to leadership opportunities. The demographics analysis provides the respondents' backgrounds according to marital status. Married women were the highest group, accounting for 73.4% of the total respondents compared to the single status group with 16.7% and divorced women ranked third highest with 5.7%. The findings of the study show that women leaders have dual responsibility as a mother and the breadwinner of the family. The extent to which they are committed to family affairs will affect their involvement as leaders. It also suggests that these individuals have managed to navigate the complexities of work-life balance and successfully combine their leadership roles with their marital commitments.

As for the level of education as shown in Table 1, 157 respondents who have a bachelor's degree are the dominant number representing 55.7%. Meanwhile, respondents who are educated at the master's degree level were 25.2%. Only 5% have SPM/STPM, meanwhile, 6.7% have attained a diploma level. The respondent's level of education at the tertiary level puts them in a position to be ready to hold the title of leader in their respective organizations. The higher proportion of women leaders with a bachelor's degree suggests that higher education plays a significant role in their leadership development and career progression. It indicates that acquiring a bachelor's degree is often a common educational pathway for women aspiring to leadership positions. The findings may also suggest that a bachelor's degree is considered a minimum requirement or an entry point for women to enter leadership roles and these educational experiences have helped women develop the necessary skills and networks to advance into leadership positions. Organizations or industries may prioritize educational qualifications as a criterion for leadership positions, and women leaders with bachelor's degrees may have met these requirements.

The number of dependents of the respondents is categorized into 3 groups which are 3 and below, 4 to 6 people and 7 to 9 people. The data in Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents in this study have dependents of 3 people and below 67.4% followed by dependents of 4 to 6 people of 27.7%. The lower number of dependents suggests that women leaders with fewer caregiving responsibilities may have more flexibility and capacity to balance their professional commitments and personal responsibilities. It implies that having fewer dependents may positively influence their ability to dedicate time and energy to their leadership roles. It is important to note that the number of dependents is just one aspect of women leaders' personal circumstances. It is crucial to consider a range of factors, such as support systems, cultural norms, and individual preferences, that influence women's leadership experiences and career trajectories. The income breakdown of the respondents of this study is divided into 5 groups in the range of RM5,000 gross income. Based on Table 1, the highest group earn between RM5,001 to RM10,000 monthly income totalling 48.6%. Next, the second highest group earn RM5,000 and below was 35.8%. Meanwhile, the lowest group was women who earn monthly income between RM15,000 to RM19,999 representing 1.8% of the total participants. This scenario shows that women have no obstacles in becoming leaders if the commitment from the aspect of social networking is required outside of office hours for the benefit of the organization. The findings suggest that a significant proportion of women leaders have achieved a level of financial stability. A monthly income within this range implies a certain level of financial security, which can positively impact their confidence, decision-making, and overall career satisfaction. The study findings may indicate that women leaders within this income range possess the skills, knowledge, and expertise valued in the market. They have likely acquired the competencies and experiences necessary to secure higher-paying leadership roles.

Table 2: Employment Information of sample

	N	%		N	%
Organisation:			*Position/Grade:*		
Central government	59	20.9	Executive	133	47.2
State government	150	53.2	Mid Executive	59	20.9
Private sector	35	12.4	High Executive	29	10.3
Statutory body of the state	33	11.7	Others	61	21.6
Government subsidiaries	4	1.4			
Others	1	0.4			

Table 2 shows respondents who work in the government sector; the state government was the majority group which represent 53.2% or 150 people. Meanwhile, respondents in the central government are 59 people or 20.9%. Respondents who work in the private sector and state government statutory bodies are relatively balanced with 35 people (12.4%) and 33 people (11.7%) respectively. Even so, the commitment of respondents in the private sector is seen as somewhat less encouraging even though various platforms have been used for this purpose. The higher proportion of women leaders working in government positions suggests the dominance of the public sector as a significant source of leadership opportunities for women. It reflects the prevalence of women leaders in governmental organizations, agencies, or departments. Women leaders in government positions have the potential to shape public policy and decision-making processes. The findings suggest that women are actively participating in leadership roles that directly impact governance, public services, and policy development. In terms of job grades, the respondents are divided into 4 groups. The four groups are non-Executives/Others, Executives Grade 41 – 46, Middle Executives Grade 48 – 52 and Senior Executives 53 and above. Most respondents are from the executive grade group which is 133 people or 47.2%. Respondents in the non-executive category were categorized as others, which is a total of 61 people or 21.6%. The middle executive respondent group is a total of 59 people or 20.9% while the lowest group of respondents is the top executive with a total of 29 people representing 10.3% of the total number of respondents. The data shows that it meets the target respondents for this study. The concentration of women leaders in the executive grade group

suggests that they have reached higher levels of leadership within their respective organizations. It indicates that they have progressed in their careers and have attained positions of significant responsibility and influence.

5. Conclusions

This profiling study helps in understanding women's demographic factors in leadership positions in Sabah. This study most women leaders with more than 5 years until retirement age implies age diversity within leadership positions. A high proportion of the indigenous ethnic women leaders in this study suggests that the study has successfully captured the perspectives and leadership experiences of these specific groups. The women's leadership practices, decision-making, and organizational approaches may be influenced by their faith, values, and cultural norms. Locations offer more diverse and prominent leadership positions, attracting women who are seeking career advancement and professional growth. A significant proportion of women leaders have achieved a level of financial stability. The government sectors provide avenues for women's career advancement into leadership roles. Leaders in the executive grade group likely possess extensive experience and expertise in their fields. Women leaders have acquired the necessary skills, knowledge, and capabilities to excel in their leadership roles through years of professional development and hands-on experience. They have overcome barriers and challenges to reach senior leadership positions, demonstrating their ambition, determination, and resilience.

The study's conclusions shed light on the amazing capacity of most women leaders to successfully manage their leadership duties with their domestic responsibilities while striking a balance between their professional and personal commitments. Additionally, this study provides some insights into the importance of education attainment, at least a bachelor's degree to equip women leaders with professional skills, knowledge, and competencies that are relevant to their leadership roles. By highlighting the achievements and capabilities of women leaders, organisations can contribute to changing societal perceptions and creating a more gender-equal culture. More recent studies on women leaders in Malaysia demonstrated that the government is committed to accomplishing gender equality through various policies and measures. Efforts have been increased and strengthened from time to time to accelerate women's status and address gender issues, including the empowerment of all women, as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Abdullah and Hassan, 2022). However, conducting more studies to gain deeper insights into the barriers faced by women and establish the necessary conditions for women to excel in leadership positions, particularly in Sabah is crucial to enable more women to contribute to their fullest potential.

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