

Complexities of Muslim Women Managers' Careers: An Identity Perspective

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Abstract

Women in managerial positions continually narrate experiences of discrimination, stereotyping and several forms of career blocks limiting their advancement. Consequently underrepresentation of women and female talent drain remains a key issue as a result of these negative experiences. To sustainably address these issues to attract and retain female talent, it is essential to understand the specific experiences and unique challenges of women relative to their context. Although a number of studies have examined the differences between men and women routes to success, most studies fail to take into account the cultural differences that play a crucial role in shaping an individual's subjective perceptions and overall experiences. Understanding the influence of the interactions between culture, religion and context on an individual's identity will shed light to unique experiences of Muslim women managers in Malaysia. The research conducts in-depth interviews with top level Malay managers, probing their experience of upward career mobility and inequities in the workplace. The study uncovers what it essentially means to be a Muslim woman manager in Malaysia, the unique challenges these women face, and how Muslim women managers in Malaysia experience and manage their roles in the family, workplace and society in their attempt for career success.

Keywords: *Careers, identity, gender, culture and religion.*

1. Introduction

Globalization and social change have significantly improved career opportunities for women around the globe. Despite this progress, research still finds significant lag in women's career success compared to male counterparts. Women in managerial positions continually narrate experiences of discrimination, stereotyping and several forms of career blocks limiting their advancement. Underrepresentation of women and female talent drain in the higher echelons of management remains a key issue as a result of these negative experiences. To sustainably address these issues and retain female talent, it is essential to understand the specific experiences and unique challenges of women relative to their context. Although a number of studies have examined the differences between men and women routes to career success, most studies fail to take into account the cultural differences that play a crucial role in shaping an individual's subjective perceptions and overall experiences. Cross cultural literature on women in management stresses on the need to consider the impact of culture and traditions

on experiences of women in management, drawing on the notion that experiences of women managers are multi-facet by nature (Omar & Davidson, 2001).

The study draws on Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory to theoretically guide the examination of the unique career experiences of Muslim women managers, from an identity construction perspective. The specific focus on Muslim women is motivated by the notion that these women battle not only generic gender issues but also face a tension between expected roles and norms in their traditional societies and modern day values and expectations in the workplace. Contemporary Muslim women, striving to pursue their career goals are often challenged by dominant traditionalist interpretations and rulings of patriarchal authorities that define the so called ‘proper conduct’ and ideal role of a woman in society (Offenhauer, 2005; Othman, 2006). The study aims to investigate the career experiences of ambitious Muslim women managers in Malaysia.

2. Research Context

Malaysia presents an ideal context for the study. Although Islam is the predominantly practiced religion in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011), the presence of a plural society results in a moderate practice of Islam, peacefully coexisting with modern values and other religions (Tong & Turner, 2008). The pluralistic and multi-confessional state of Malaysia presents an interesting backdrop to examine cultural and religious differences pertaining to behavioral norms and expectations. Examining the manner in which Malay Muslim women fare in this society is of particular interest.

From an economic perspective, women’s participation in Malaysia’s workforce remains significantly lower than males. In 2014 male participation rate was reported to be 80.7%, while female participation was reported to be only 53.6% (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2015; Economic Planning Unit, 2015). Malaysia also reports low representation of women in managerial positions, especially Muslim women in urban areas (Bakar & Abdullah, 2007). This suggests possible differences arising out of ethnic and religious cleavages in the Malaysian society. It is of particular interest to understand why Muslim women remain underrepresented in higher management.

3. Research Methodology

The research involves eleven in-depth interviews with top level Malay managers in the private sector, probing their experience of upward career mobility and inequities in the workplace. Interpretive phenomenology is used to probe identity construction and develop insight on the unique career progression experiences of these women. All interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded to facilitate the transcription and analysis process. A line-by-line coding approach was used at the initial stages of data analysis, creating a systematic order in which themes became apparent.

4. Findings and Discussion

An individual's identity construction is a dynamic and complex system that entails an ongoing process occurring in various contexts, and serves as a useful tool in understanding individual behaviour and experience. An individual constantly undergoes a process of reshuffling internal priorities to reflect salient identities in a given context and situation. Due to the subjective and non-static nature of individual identity, consideration of context on individual behaviour is amplified (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). The study defines an individual's identity by the different roles and expectations that the individual conforms to. Based on this perspective, the findings of this study reveal that religion and culture play a crucial role on Muslim women's perceived roles and behavioural expectations in the home, workplace and society, which consequently shapes their overall identity and career experiences. As these women shift between different contextual spheres, they encounter different conflicting roles and expectations resulting in a unique set of challenges in their careers. The study uncovers what it essentially means to be a Muslim woman manager in Malaysia, the unique challenges these women face, and how Muslim women managers in Malaysia experience and manage their roles in the home, workplace and society in their attempt for career success. Figure 1 summarizes the study findings, and illustrates that contextualized roles and expectations influence Muslim women's career experiences.

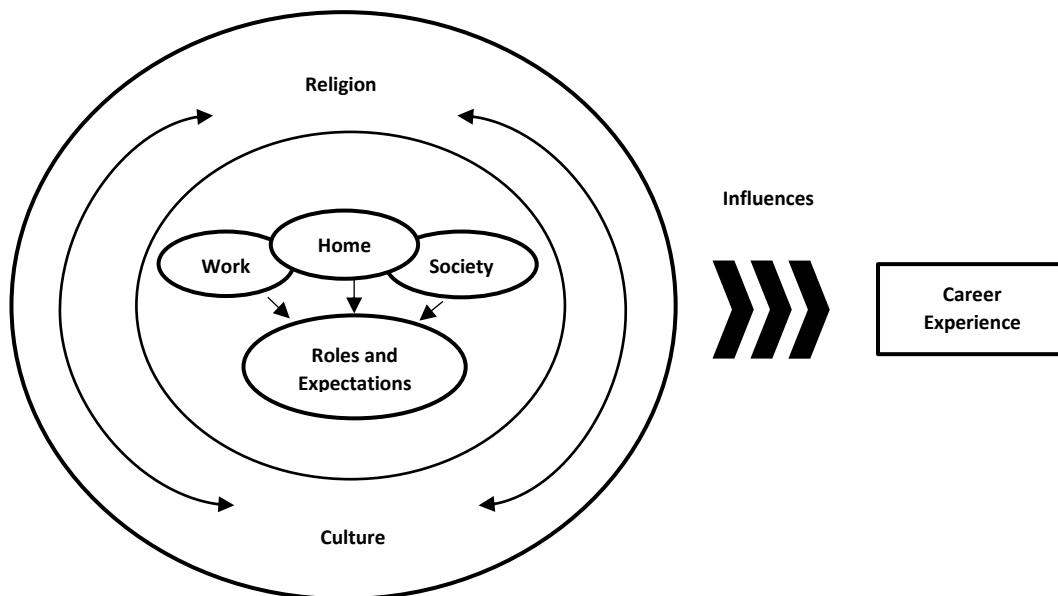


Figure 1: The influence of Contextual Roles and Expectations on Career Experience

Analysis of interview transcripts revealed that the participant's narratives of experience served as a reflection of salient identities activated in differing contexts. For clearer articulation, the findings of this study are presented under three main themes that reflect how Muslim women's identity experiences are shaped by religion and culture in their different contexts, and consequently how the conflicts between these demands influences their career experiences. The key themes include; (i) Workplace Demands and Identity Conflict, (ii) Home Roles and Identity Conflict and (iii) Societal Expectations and Identity Conflict.

4.1 Conflicts of Workplace Demands & Identity

From the narratives it was observed that the participants possess a unique identity in the workplace. Acknowledging that it is a man's world, and in order to succeed they have to be like men, these women tend to adopt masculine traits and a preference for working with males. They also tend to adopt strong personality traits and acknowledge that they share similar views as men in terms of career success. However the women also acknowledge that as Malay Muslim women, their feminine values should not be compromised. This view is further reinforced by people's expectations of their behavior as Malay women. Consequently the women engage in an identity work process to fulfil both expectations in the workplace and within their society, activating different identities in their contexts. This experience reflects the

women's struggle between fulfilling the workplace identity roles and expectations and societal identity roles and expectations. Below are selective narratives that depict these issues.

4.1.1 Narratives on Conflicts of Workplace Demands & Identity:

Some people find me very strong but they don't mind because they know that is the type that I am... but like some people are actually like 'oh she is too strong', or 'she's too tough' and so on, and not really an ideal kind of friend... (P7, Director-Business Development).

So the decision they (males) make is clear cut, so when they make good and clear decisions you know what to do and that's all I need. For women you know they have a lot of considerations, what about this what about that, yeah but what is your decision, I still don't get a decision. So it's easier for me to work with men. (P8, Director-Transport).

"I feel that Malay women should always play this, not submissiveness, but we should be, you know we should remain gentle, feminine and so you must never compromise your femininity even in your leadership position, don't be aggressive, like a man you know." (P5, CEO-Banking).

"He (her boss) said to me, you have to behave in a certain way because you're a Malay girl and dress appropriately and all that." (P8, Director-Transport).

My boss said to me 'maybe it's not good for you to hang around and talk to this guy until midnight'. Then come on, I did not do anything wrong. So yeah again it goes back to like, how society accepts us you know." (P4 Director- Consultancy).

4.2 Conflicts of Home Roles & Identity

Relating to their strong sense of identity as mothers, the women express a constant internal conflict of having to leave their children for many hours to attend to their careers. However the participants also make constant mention of the need for personal fulfilment and achievement, in addition to being married and having children. The narratives strongly depict their salient identity attributes and the roles and responsibilities the women ascribe to themselves. The women negotiate their internal conflicts pertaining to the need for self-accomplishment in their career and the need to be good mothers, by drawing a strong sense of motivation for their work from their children and adopting the viewpoint that what they do is for their children. Below are selective narratives that depict these issues.

4.2.1 Narratives on Conflicts of Home Roles & Identity:

If there were any challenges in the work place, it was just the way things are, you know you're a mother, and you have that conflict within yourself, you know to leave your child for so long. (P5, CEO-Banking).

I know at the end of the day the kids are actually our future so it is actually your investment. But I do not know why we can't you do both? Why is it? What is the purpose of your life? I mean like I know

you want a good family, but at the same time, you can achieve both, to me. (P7, Director-Business Development).

So for him (her son) in a way it makes him proud. And of course when my son, the most important thing in my life, when my son is proud of me, I am very proud of myself. (P1, Director- Hospitality).

The real push for me to keep on are really my children, so if people were to ask me the one factor that continues to motivate and inspire me, they are actually the three little farts I have at home... The real source of motivation are my three little girls. (P5, CEO- Banking).

The women also narrate a conflict between their roles as wives, and a need to conform to their husband's wishes, while attempting to fulfil workplace expectations. These aspects reflect the conflict between their workplace demands and roles and the roles and expectation Muslim women have in the home as mothers and wives. Below are some narrations from the interviews.

4.2.2 Narratives on Conflicts of Home Roles & Identity:

You know you have a husband and you have the children and then you know whatever you do you know you can't neglect that. You still have to think about that. You also have some restrictions as a wife, you're not free to just go wherever you want to. (P2, Director-Healthcare).

Especially when you have to attend all these meetings, and then sometimes you have meetings over dinners and so on. I don't know why, but sometimes you tend to be the only ladies there, so your partner needs to be prepared for that because sometimes they (spouses) don't really like you know, they be like 'huh, you're going for dinner meeting, why can't you do it during office hours why must you go to dinners and all.' So they will be a lot of things, once in a while that will happen and you just need to have the understanding of your partner." (P7, Director-Business Development).

4.3 Conflicts of Societal Expectations and Identity

The existence of contextually specific stereotypes of Malay women presents an interesting challenge for this group of women. The women report that they face poor language ability stereotype, a cronyism stereotype, and are often questioned on their level of competency simply because they are Malays. As a result these women earn lower salaries and are not given equal opportunities to display their full potential. This form of stereotypical behavior acts as an identity threat for these women, as a result extra effort is needed to disassociate with the negative judgment. Consequently, the women face a double handicap, in that not only do they have to prove themselves as women in the workplace battling generic forms of discrimination, but they also have to prove their capabilities and competency as Malays. Consequently, they face a double effect of negative scrutiny in the workplace. Narratives of the women's stereotypical challenges are presented below.

4.3.1 Narratives of Conflicts of Societal Expectations and Identity:

I can tell you as a Malay, a Malay who makes it has to show more ability than a non-Malay. There is this sort of stereotype in this society. (P5, CEO- Banking).

They (society) always has this stereotype like 'have you studied abroad'. I don't know whether Malay ladies are not supposed to speak well in English, or bring themselves up confidently. They always find it amazing when you can converse well and confidently. (P7, Director-Business Development).

Another societal issue the women highlight in their narratives pertains to behavioral expectations imposed on Malay women. These expectations relate to traditional values emphasizing modest feminine behavior, domestic roles, dress code and head covering, boundaries of socialization, and suchlike. These expectations and roles restrict the women's ability to successfully engage with their careers in a manner that is up to par with their male counterparts. A key issue the women narrate is that these implicitly expected domestic responsibilities in the home go unrecognized in the workplace. Moreover, the traditional norms and gender role expectations creates a restriction for these women in terms of their flexibility and socialization ability, and in some cases results in skeptical notions of their ability to dedicate equal levels of focus and commitment. Additionally, the need to conform to societal behavioural expectations and maintain strong levels of professionalism in the their interactions with males results in a absence of social trust, as such the women find themselves needing to put forth extra effort to develop other forms of trust as a form of compensation. Narratives reflecting these issues are presented below.

4.3.2 Narratives of Conflicts of Societal Expectations and Identity:

I think in our society they (society) still think that Malay women should be the one that is traditional, you know stays at home, cook, take care of the family, it's still the traditional way." (P4, Director-Consultancy).

It's how you carry yourself that makes a difference, you see it's a perception, and what your actions are will make the other person perceive you in the manner that your actions tells. So it's really about how you carry yourself. If you know your limits, you know your boundaries, especially as a Muslim woman, and you must always remember it's a working relationship, you should not mix too much, always remain professional. (P2, Director- Healthcare).

The challenge that I face most is especially when we want to get jobs, as a Muslim woman, even as a woman, a Muslim woman is actually in a more delicate situation, because out there it's still a man's world, so you still need a guy to go out there and get the job, it's not easy for the girl to. But if it's a non-Muslim they still have little bit more, what do you call this, easy to approach, but as a Muslim we have this barrier and hesitance. So yeah we do face this. (P4 Director- Consultancy).

5. Conclusion

Essentially the women acknowledge that as Muslim Malay women they face specific challenges, expectations and commitments, which in some instances may serve as barriers in comparison to women of other backgrounds. However also aspects form a strong part of their salient ethnic and religious identity. Consequently the women attempt to embrace these challenges and strategically engage in compensatory actions to overcome their hurdles and successfully progress their careers. The women make constant mention of proving themselves in terms of capabilities and competencies, there by earning trust and respect of others around them. The women also display strong levels of loyalty and dedication, which also assists them in advancing. Through engaging in the different identity shifts, playing the parts they are expected to in the different contexts, the women are successful able to negotiate their different roles and expectations. The findings of the study reflect how individuals possess multiple identities which are activated in differing social contexts (Owens, Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 2010). Utilizing an identity perspective, this study elucidates some of the unique challenges and enables a better understanding what it means to be a Muslim woman manager in Malaysia.

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