



## Women Academicians: Gender and Career Progression

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### ABSTRAK

*Laporan bertujuan untuk mencari titik perbandingan di antara pengalaman wanita di Malaysia dengan literatur yang ada antara feminis barat yang telah ditafsirkan oleh wanita yang tinggal di persekitaran akademik di New Zealand. Tujuan projek ini adalah untuk mengkaji proses dalam hierarki akademik. Persoalannya ialah bagaimana kemajuan karier berlaku dan apakah faktor yang difikirkan penting oleh wanita akademik di Malaysia. Dengan menggunakan kaedah kualitatif, kajian ini mengkaji pengalaman wanita di peringkat awal dan pertengahan karier akademik dengan memfokuskan proses memantapkan diri individu dalam persekitaran universiti.*

### ABSTRACT

*This report is intended to provide a point for comparison between the experiences of women in Malaysia and the western feminist literature as it is interpreted by a woman situated within the New Zealand academic environment. My aim in undertaking this project is to investigate the process of negotiating the academic hierarchy. How does career progression take place and what factors do Malaysian academic women consider important? Utilising a qualitative methodology the research investigates the experiences of women at the early to mid stages of their academic careers focusing particularly on the process of establishing oneself within the university environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

What is a career? The term career is traditionally linked to the process of reflection on the course of one's vocational behaviour. Investigations of career tend to focus on objective career, actual events that occur in the occupational context, or subjective career, biographical themes (Savickas 2002). Objective accounts of career based on advancement, qualifications and job title have gained most attention in career theory (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle 1999). Feminist examinations of career, on the other hand, tend to situate career within structural or institutional frameworks analysing the influence of gender and power relations in shaping organisational structures and practices (Brooks & MacKinnon 2001; Burton



1991; Katila & Merilainen 1999). In this examination of the process of establishing an academic career I consider women's career stories focusing on subjective career analysed within a framework that takes into account power relations and the globalised academic environment.

I begin this report by stating the aims of the project, introducing the participants and briefly describing the method. The final part of the introduction contextualises the study describing its origins in a cross campus reading group and grounding the analytical framework within the existent literature. In the main body of the report I address the research findings beginning with an analysis of career aspirations, the concrete career ceiling, and an analysis of the appropriateness of western feminism in the Malaysian context. I incorporate some limited statistical data into the analysis in this section. I next consider the impact women's 'double day' (as they fulfil work life and home life roles) has on career progression. In the final section of the discussion I locate the analysis within a public policy context with a brief discussion of developmentalism, education policy, and gender equity policy. I conclude by returning to the question of how the career experiences of Malaysian women compare with those in the west.

## AIMS

The objectives of this study are to provide an understanding of the ways in which women experience and negotiate their careers. A growing body of literature exists on the gendered nature of academic careers. Most of this literature considers academic careers in western countries. Given the increasingly globalised academic environment and Malaysia's historical roots in the British colonial education system it is not surprising that many of the issues for women in Malaysia are similar to those identified in the literature. My aim in this report is to contribute to a better understanding of the multiple masculinist discourses that impede the progress of academic women in the early stages of their careers in both Malaysia and western countries such as New Zealand.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

Sixteen academic women, from four universities, located in two different States in Peninsula Malaysia, were interviewed. Eleven of the participants were Muslim-Malay, two were Indian, one Chinese, one Eurasian, and one European. Most of the women were in their 30s and 40s, with 3 in their 50s. The academic level of the participants ranged from lecturer to full professor. The administrative level of the participants ranged through lecturer to deputy director of and institute to Dean.



## THE METHOD

An indepth qualitative method was utilized in this study. Topical life history interviews were conducted. Topical life histories are semi-structured interviews in which participants detail particular aspects of their lives. In this study participants were invited to tell their career stories. Prior to the interviews participants were provided with an information letter detailing the research method, identifying issues popular in western career literature, and inviting discussion and analysis of topics significant in the Malaysian academic environment. Discussion of career as located within structural or institutional frameworks was encouraged, we also entered into dialogue about the roles that ethnicity, gender, and power relations' play in shaping organisational structures and practices. In order to capture the analytic voice of the participants' I have used excerpts from the interview transcripts in this article.

## THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The question driving this research grew out of a multi-disciplinary reading group the members of whom were women in the early stages of career. In the reading group, drawing mainly from social science literature, we considered an eclectic range of subjects. An issue that particularly resonated for the group was women's academic careers in an increasingly constrained academic environment. Most of the women in the group were new to the University environment, with some having recent experience of contract teaching and research or part-time contracts. Added to this our university was at the time in the midst of 'restructuring' with publication track record featuring highly in the axing criteria. It was not difficult to locate ourselves within Bourdieu's (1998) analysis of job insecurity as a means of forcing workers into the acceptance of exploitation in an increasingly casualised globalised market place.

A literature search provided further impetus for the decision to focus on early career and to locate the research outside of a western context. There is a plethora of career literature with a major proliferation of material related directly to women and academic careers. Information on women's careers in the west abounds while information on other geographical areas is scarce. There have been a number of comparative international studies undertaken since the 1990s with analyses tending to focus on higher education management. Higher education management in general receives a lot of attention in the feminist literature while there is less attention paid to women in the beginning stages of their careers.

The career literature covers a wide range of gender related policies, equal employment opportunities (EEO) policy being one of the most popular. Practices such as networking and mentoring schemes also receive a lot of attention. The



idea of universities as masculinist institutions in which women have limited access to the academic hierarchy and are required to undertake disproportional amounts of teaching are also well documented in the literature (see for example Brooks 1997; Brooks & MacKinnon 2001; Morley 2003). Recent studies undertaken in New Zealand found that gender discrimination is still present in the university and identified the need for future research directed towards providing a more positive workplace for women (Brooks 1997; Vasil 1993). In Malaysia little in the way of career literature exists and this study suggests that while there are some commonalities the issues raised in an equivalent body of literature might be significantly different.

## THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

### CAREER ASPIRATIONS, CONCRETE CEILINGS AND WESTERN FEMINISM

The glass ceiling, against which women bump their heads as they progress in their careers, is an established metaphor in feminist career literature. Some commentators such as Schlafly (2003:135) would suggest that it does not exist: 'no one can see this Glass Ceiling except feminists – hence the artfulness of the term'. However, the smaller percentages of women in top management positions are testament to the glass ceilings tangibility. In their study of the (plexi-)glass ceiling in higher education, Quina, Cotter and Romenesko (1998) suggest that the glass ceiling can be observed at every rung of the academic career ladder and suggest that the bulk of the research literature supports an institutional explanatory model in which formal and informal institutional policies affect women and minorities differently. Quina, Cotter and Romenesko's analysis can certainly be extrapolated to the Malaysian context.

In Malaysian higher education however, the impediments to career progression are more explicit. Many of the women interviewed moved into line management positions early in their careers. However, they suggested that it is difficult to get promoted beyond Dean:

Actually there are no women who are VC's at the moment, so if women are rising up you just [dis]place them to be Director of an Institute. You sideline them. There are a lot of women who are Deans but that's about it. (Deputy Dean, Malay)

Appointments above this middle management level tend to be political appointments rather than the result of academic merit. Omar (1993) in her report of women managers in higher education at the University of Malaya suggests that there is no feeling of prejudice in the appointment of women into lower level academic and administrative posts. The picture is different however, for top-level management positions. Only two women have ever held positions as Deputy Vice-Chancellor in Malaysian Universities (Singh 2002). The reason for the dearth



of women at this level may be that senior appointments are political appointments, they are not made on merit, nor are they open to competition, there is no accountability and appointees must also be aware of and render their support to the ideology and aspirations of the government of the time (Omar 1993). The career ceiling was alluded to repeatedly in the interviews:

Well, I want to be a vice chancellor one day if I can... but I know I can't. (Professor/Deputy Director, Malay)

If I am very ambitious and I am very driven then I must move along because anything more than associate professor is unlikely at a public university. (Lecturer, non-Malay)

As far as staff here are concerned there is not affirmative action for women but there are women who are HOD's (Head of Department) but I am not sure as far as Deanship goes. Clearly it also has to take into account ethnicity. (Deputy Dean, non-Malay)

I have never really thought of my career reaching this I thought I would maybe get a Masters. I do like to do things well but I never thought seriously of being here. (Professor/Deputy Director (since 1989), Malay)

In her analysis of women in senior management in Malaysian Universities, Luke (2001) labels this the *concrete ceiling*. She suggests that:

There is nothing hidden or transparent about women's inability to reach the most senior ranks of the university management, because all senior executive positions in the sector are political appointments (Luke 2001:203).

The women who took part in this study were aware that their careers could only progress to a certain level. Mohamad (2002a) suggests that although many women do want a policy of gender equity this principle is invalidated by a religious system that privileges a male-centric discourse and outlook. In the west religion does not play much of a part in career advancement. Nonetheless women are still underrepresented in the higher echelons of the university. A number of authors suggest that individual merit is a myth and that there is in reality a patriarchal support system serving to privilege male academics (Bagilhole & Goode 2001; Bell & Gordon 1999; Krefting 2003). While the 'concrete' career ceiling, with its untimely curtailment of career progression, sits uncomfortably within western rhetoric of equal opportunities, in effect there are many similarities between it and the western 'glass ceiling'. Analysing the western literature on how to overcome the 'glass ceiling' effect Luke (2001:213-214) suggests that the self-promotional tactics promoted in such literature is unsuitable in the Malaysian context:

Clearly, such individualist and competitive strategies advocated in the western literature are inappropriate in cultural contexts where women are socialized to enact a more 'subdued', 'quiet', invisible and family-oriented femininity.

A variety of issues relating to impediments to career advancement were discussed and analysed in the interviews. Fifteen of the sixteen women



interviewed received their postgraduate education in western countries in which equality is a firmly established principle. A selection of their critical comments on the effectiveness of western women's struggles for equity is provided below:

I don't like the way Americans treat their professional women.... I could have stayed in the states, I was offered a post but I told them if I came home I would be treated like a Queen Bee if I stayed there I would have to slog it out. (HOD/Professor, Malay)

You see I did do my research on gender.... Also these gender struggles are very fragmented. .... That kind of struggle as a political struggle or conscious struggle has not worked so the education abroad has been an eye opener (Deputy Dean, non-Malay)

Morely and Walsh (1995:33) point to the paradox of instigating affirmative action in an environment geared to reward merit and point out that:

...it could also be argued that located as it is within the framework of discriminating practices and prejudice, affirmative action policy remains ameliorative and thus rooted within a surface perspective of racism and sexism which neglects to address the structural detriments of social inequality and other social practices that produce and reproduce racial and sexual inequality.

The failure of EEO policies to effect change has led some feminists to call into question the future of feminism in the contemporary university (Kenway & Langmead 2002). Krefting (2003) on the other hand, suggests that a feminist poststructuralist analysis of factors such as ambivalent sexism in the academy and the gendered nature of the micro-politics of everyday life provide openings for challenge and resistance. Regardless of how we analyse the problem the material realities of gender inequity remain. Ascent of the academic hierarchy and the corresponding attrition of women's participation are well documented in the literature (Bell & Gordon 1999; Brooks 1997; Brooks and McKinnon 2001; Krefting 2003; Lukes 2001; Quina, Cotter & Romenesko 1998). In New Zealand women are still seriously under represented beyond the level of senior lecturer. According to Ministry of Education figures, in 2002, 15% of associate professors/readers and 14.5% of professors in New Zealand universities were women. Information on gender ratios in Malaysian Universities is limited. However, figures drawn from seven universities in Malaysia in 1993 put the figures at 19.6% for associate professorships and information drawn from a sub-set of four of these Universities put the figure at 9.4% for women professors (Women and Human Resource Studies Unit 1996).

In New Zealand, the first country in the world to give women the vote, we proudly parade our women Prime Ministers and Chief Executive Officers and the rhetoric of equality in employment is well established in New Zealand legislation. We have had the Government Service Equal Pay Act since 1960 and the Equal Pay Act that applied the equal value principle to the private sector, since 1972. None-the-less, despite being amongst the first countries to adopt equal value policies and even with the existence of robust institutional equal employment



policies, there is still a pattern of female under representation New Zealand Universities. In 2002, 36% of all academic staff in New Zealand universities were women. Information on Malaysian Universities is ad hoc and difficult to come by. However, the crude comparison enabled by the data below suggests a similar ratio of women to men in academic positions exists in both countries. According to a study done by the Women, and Human Resource Studies Unit at the University Sains Malaysia (1996), in 1993, 28.2% of academic staff and administrators in seven universities in Malaysia were women. Information gained from the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 2002 placed the percentage of academic women staff at 43.9%. While it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions from the data it is possible to conclude that despite the different discourses circulating in each academic environment the chances of establishing an academic career are not so disparate in Malaysia and New Zealand.

#### WORK LIFE HOME LIFE

The reasons for the lack of women in the higher echelons of universities are complex. However, it is clear, both in the western literature and from the participants' stories that women's career progress is hampered by discourses of femininity that suggest that women should be responsible for domestic life in addition to their work commitments. Rigorous feminist analyses of this phenomenon, from Oakley's (1974) groundbreaking analysis of housework as work, to Waring's (1988) critique of the exclusion of women's unpaid labour from countries national accounting criteria, exist. Analysing the work/home life nexus, authors refer to the 'double-shift' (Hochschild 1989) 'women's double day' (McRae 1986) and the unrecognised work of emotional labour that women do (Habgood 1992). In an analysis of the academic environment Vasil (1993) suggests that the role conflict women experience impacts negatively on research productivity and career progression. As the following excerpt demonstrates the discursive construction of women's 'proper' place in the domestic sphere in Islam adds an extra dimension to the work/home life nexus.

There is a glass ceiling, there is patriarchy, and then there is Islam and the constant tension of should women be out? Shouldn't they be in the home? primarily as mothers. ... there are these tensions as well. (Associate Professor non-Malay)

In Malaysia, the tensions between women's workforce participation and their role within the family are mediated by *adat* the customs, traditions, and laws which determine the structure and organisation of Malay society which emphasises unity and gender complimentary, giving women relatively high status and the ability to exercise power and agency (Sleboda 2001:101). However, Asian feminine ideals and the Muslim emphasis on gender complimentary rather than equality combine and work/home life role conflict features strongly in the life history narratives.





My husband, at 8 o'clock, he will be in his office and he comes home at 6 o'clock. But I had to run the errands every day and send the children to school, bring them home and look after the children, prepare their cut lunch and take them to badminton and all those things, I had to do. I don't know why, but that is my obligation. I say I don't mind doing all these things as long as he gives me the support.

But it is still difficult because now we need to publish, do research, things that you enjoy doing, you know. I really enjoy doing all this stuff. I want to tell others, I want to share this with others, women can do many things, but not men they can do only one. Women can take the challenge; women are more competent, men are more independent. (Director Malay)

The difficulties of balancing child rearing and a work life are a popular topic in western career literature. Fourteen of the sixteen women who took part in this project were married with children. I was struck by the number of children the women had, with one woman having eight. My own experience of the academy is that many women have few or no children. Recent research undertaken at Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests that most senior women faculty do not have children (Bailyn 2003). For Muslim women there exists both an expectation that you will have children and a lack of public day care facilities. At first glance this seems an untenable situation. However, the Malaysian 'double day' is mediated by the fact that it is not unusual for academic women to have maids. Women's employment is also often supported by the extended family. Grandparents looked after the children of several of the participants while they travelled overseas to complete their PhD's. Islamic discourses of women's responsibility for the domestic realm combined with the availability and affordability of maids produces different balances of freedoms, choices and constraints in the work/home life nexus.

What of the role of husbands in this work/home life nexus? Almost every one of the fourteen interviews contains a reference to the importance of having a supportive husband. *My husband is very supportive* could, in fact, be the catch phrase for the project. The support of husband and family has been identified as important in the western literature to the point that there is a disproportionate amount of literature on dual career couples. In terms of the academic environment Chrisler (1998) identifies the support of family as one factor necessary for scholarly productivity, while Peterson (1998) discusses the advantages of being a partner in an egalitarian dual career relationship. The *supportive husband* title covered a range of practices from a turn as house-husband during the last six months of a participant's PhD to husbands who allowed participation in academic life only to the point where it did not interfere with domestic life.

I could only do PhD if it was on top [of childcare and domestic work]... I think my husband gave me permission to study so I must make full use of that green light given to me. (Director Malay)





My husband didn't come to the UK [for Masters and PhD study] but he was very supportive. In our culture you are not supposed to go against your husband. (Professor/Deputy Director Malay)

I have been lucky because I have always been supported by my husband. I couldn't even afford to rent my house on what they pay me here. (Lecturer non-Malay)

Sexual Politics play an important role in the home and in the academic workplace. Early in the interview process, there are boundaries outside which academic women's careers are unlikely to progress. The participants' suggested that it is important to have a supportive husband, but that even supportive husbands may have problems with women's work interfering with home life. They also suggested that women are expected to fulfill their feminine roles *and* go to work. In addition, it was pointed out that both formal and informal work relationships involving interaction between the sexes can be problematic for Muslim women. This is particularly the case with informal professional relationships such as conversation over morning teas, traveling to and from functions and mentoring relationships. The participants were aware of the importance of profiling themselves: going to University functions, sitting on committees, socialising informally, and getting known within the academic hierarchy. However, being aware of the importance of profiling oneself does not mean that the choice to do so will be made:

I go to functions with my husband because it is expected the wife will go with the husband. I go to functions at the university only if I think I will be missed... (Professor/Deputy Director Malay)

I have a husband ... and he is I wouldn't say old fashioned but he still holds to the traditional values.... Sometimes we have night responsibilities like opening ceremonies, traveling dignitaries and that does not include spouses so I have to ask him. And he always says 'well do you have to?'

Michelle: So there are freedoms to go so far as a woman but there are limits?

Yes, well I am married so I always go to the Islamic side and ask my husband. Sometimes it isn't so much asking his permission but acknowledging his presence as the head of the family.

Michelle: has he ever said no?

No but there are things like I cannot ride in a car with a male staff [member]. It is because he doesn't want people gossiping oh I saw your wife with someone. He says 'I don't have any questions about it it's just a no'.

Michelle: Is this to do with religion or is it just him?

I think it's more about religion because for him it's the Koran about relationships and all that. (Deputy Director Malay)

Being a woman you don't talk about things informally at the coffee table with your peers... Regardless of your ethnicity it is difficult to be part of a gang so the social aspect is missing. (Professor Malay)



The importance of profiling oneself for career purposes is taken for granted in the western literature. In Malaysia, the profiling process is more complex. Serving to limit women's access to informal career networks, gendered social conventions, such as those identified in the excerpts above, are tied to religious identity and ethnicity. Like the career ceiling beyond which women know they are unlikely to progress, gender politics, such as those that would be classified as the workings of the old boys network in the western literature, are explicitly articulated in Malaysia. That gender proscribes women's participation in some aspects of university life is well understood, this may release women from time consuming obligations. Nonetheless the fact that women's exclusion from formal and informal networks affects career adversely pervades the feminist career literature. The exclusion of women is particularly significant when we take into account that the development of professional networks is both vital and difficult for early career academic women (Quinlan 1999). While the old boys network and career networks are often amorphous and difficult to pinpoint the legislative context of gender in equality is much more open to scrutiny.

#### THE PUBLIC POLICY ENVIRONMENT

Public policy in Malaysia does not discriminate against women's participation in the work force. Women's Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia contend that it is a society that largely accepts and encourages women's employment (Women's Agenda For Change 1999). That Malaysia as a nation shaped by *Vision 2020*, former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vision of modernity via economic prosperity, also confounds the thesis that public policy is to blame for the gender gaps in employment statistics. To the contrary Mahathir's national development policy, designed to achieve economic prosperity, required women's participation in the work force. Education policy also supports women's work force participation with Malaysia having a history of encouraging the education of women (Loh Kok Wah & Khoo 2002; Mohamad 2002b).

Thus developmentalism and a history of female education provide opportunities for women, in that their participation in the work force is required if economic development is to be fully realised. The following analyses demonstrate that both the historical and public policy context opens up possibilities for women in terms of pursuing academic careers:

Mahathir the focus of his vision is in development, economic development so the content is developmentalism. In such a paradigm, from that sort of focus, women are encouraged, educated, enabled in public space given positions, given voice partly because it is the right thing to do in moderation in a modern space where people are equal partners. To enable economic development you need women. You need women in factories you need women to come out of their homes out of the domestic sphere. In a country of just 23



million people you need women to work. But I think that women are recognised on the whole for their abilities. {cites names of various faculties at this university where women are Deans} However, I am also nervous about trotting out individuals and making out that they represent an unproblematic ascendance of women. (Associate Professor non-Malay)

Malaysia was experiencing tremendous growth particularly from the 70's on, very big vision, very big policies, many people were being sent overseas because we felt that we wanted to move towards this developed status by 2020. So you must have infrastructure as well as the human resource so this gave many opportunities. At the same time there was a strong bias towards economic development in a very crude capitalist way. Having a working wife meant that there were two incomes and there was a very clear status according to wealth. So it was the in thing to have the wife working as it brings substantial income to the family. Also it gives opportunities, not because it came through a gender policy. Academic women you will see a majority of Malay women and a small majority of non-Malay. They followed their spouses while they were doing further studies so it makes sense to have your wife pursue further study. The University was also pushing very aggressively for all academics to get their PhD. (Deputy Dean non-Malay)

Gender equity rhetoric in terms of both institutional discourses and state policies exist. Article 8(1) of the Malaysian constitution now states that: 'all persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law'. While women's organisations do suggest that women's employment is supported they are less positive about equality policy arguing that the protection against gender discrimination guaranteed in this article of the constitution is not upheld in practice (Women's Agenda For Change 1999). The websites of these NGOs and the analyses of the participants demonstrate engagement with international feminist ideas, such as critiques of the ways in which seemingly neutral policies normalise the hegemony of the dominant groups in society. Women in Malaysia may not be formally discriminated against under the law, but neither were the women interviewed in this study aware of any formal national or institutional policies designed to promote women's participation and career progression in academia. For example, no academic women's research awards or formal mentoring schemes aimed at women exist. Despite the lack of enabling policies the participants generally viewed the government's position with regard to women favourably. The following analysis articulates a certain amount of ambivalence toward policy changes evident in several of the interviews:

I did the sociology of race and feminist theory and postmodern theory and discourse theory especially the stuff on power by Foucault. All of these areas of academia on race and politics and power and feminism were important... I'm not saying this for political correctness, I mean it: The Malaysian government is very empowering of women. I will give you the down side though. It is very empowering when compared with many other developing and third world countries. I don't like those terms but that's fine we will appropriate them. You will find people telling you we have whole section on women in our five-year development plans. We have a national policy of women that was implemented in 1994. (Associate Professor non-Malay)

Malaysia is very much a part of globalised information era. Vision 2020 aggressively thrust Malaysia into the globalised networks of information technology via the creation of a multimedia super corridor designed to springboard Malaysia into the digital age. Women academics have long been part of an international community; a community that tends to be at the forefront of technological change. The global free flow of information opens up possibilities for women both inside and outside of academi to engage in a critical dialogue with multiple feminisms, adapting, utilising, discarding and continuing to challenge, gender inequalities.

Malaysia is a nation shaped by a legacy of developmentalism and women's education and participation in the workforce. In terms of academic freedoms and career progression, this research reveals that masculinist discourses manifest a particular set of tensions in Malaysia that differ from those most commonly consider in the west.

## CONCLUSION

How do women fare in terms of establishing an academic career in an Islamic country? This research has raised as many questions as it has answered. Limited statistical information on gender composition within Malaysian Universities exists. Drawing upon the available statistical information together with the narratives of the participants, their relative ages, length of time in academia and position within the hierarchy, the answer seems to be that the situation for women in the earlier stages of their careers may not be as dissimilar in Western and Islamic countries as might be expected.

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