

Women's Participation in Academic JCC in Public Universities in Malaysia: Some Underrepresentation Issues

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ABSTRACT

Generally, we have seen successful women that have demonstrated considerable leadership qualities in many areas such as in community and informal organisations, in private and public organisations. However, women have significantly been discriminated through socialisation and negative stereotyping of women and men that reinforce the tendency of decision making positions to remain as the domain of men. In addition, the underrepresentation of women in decision making positions prevents women from having significant impact on many key decisions in organisations. This paper discusses on the participation of women in Joint Consultative Committees (JCC), a form of workers' representation in public universities in Malaysia. The objective of this paper is to explore the effectiveness of JCC in public universities in Malaysia from women's perspective. This qualitative study employs in-depth interview technique to analyse the factors contributed to low participation of women in the Academic JCC whilst addressing the importance of women's participation in public universities environment. The findings have some implication towards the policy making of JCC, hence; it reflects that women's participation could be beneficial beyond the traditional JCC practices for the public universities in Malaysia.

Keywords: *decision making; women's participation; joint consultative committees; public universities; workers' representation.*

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INTRODUCTION

The research on Employee Participation (EP) in private and public sectors in Malaysia was exemplary in the context of men dominating the decision making in organisation. Hence, the knowledge on women's participation in the similar position were almost diminishing and the reasons for the silence among the women in this modernisation era are still a mind-boggling issue that need to be discovered. Therefore the aim of this paper is to highlight

some emerging issues with regards to the effectiveness of the Academic Joint Consultative Committees (Academic JCC) in public universities, from the women perspectives. The objectives of the research are (i) to explore the views of women's participation in the Academic JCC; and (ii) to explore the factors that hinder the women from participating in the key decision making process of the Academic JCC in public universities. Subsequently, addressing their limitations and evaluating for improvement. The findings unleashed the reasons of the silence of women in the Academic JCC and addressed the importance of women's participation in Academic JCC in public university environment.

Women's Participation in the Academic JCC: Some Underrepresentation Issues

The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Sri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak once quoted:

"if we look at the progress we have made in Malaysia, there is no denying that a large part of it has been achieved thanks to the women of this country"

Source: Annual Report, 2011: Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia.

The statement was a powerful note reflecting that women's participation is needed in most of the government agenda. In general, we have seen successful inspiring women leaders that have demonstrated considerable leadership qualities in many areas such as in community and informal organisation, in private and public organisation. However, women have significantly been discriminated through socialisation and are open to negative stereotyping of women and men that reinforce the tendency of decision making to remain as the domain of men. In addition, the underrepresentation of women in decision making prevents them from having a significant impact on many key decisions in organisations.

In June 2011, the Prime Minister introduced Malaysia's national policy for women to take up at least 30% of the decision making positions in corporate sectors by 2016. In relation to that, Dato Dr Noorul Ainur Mohd Nur, the Secretary-General in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia quoted that with the policy of changing mindset and seeking to improve the gender balance of corporate boards, companies will be able to draw benefits from the widest possible range of talent. It was further reiterated that while women have achieved much in

almost every formerly male-dominated field in the professional world, there is a huge gap in women representation in indirect participation mechanism particularly in Joint Consultative Committees (JCC) in public sector particularly the public universities. To date, the research on the effectiveness of Academic JCC in public universities were obtained mostly from the male perspective, thus this paper intended to discover the factors that contributed to little participation of the women in the Academic JCC. This gives us an impression that there is still a long way to go in advancing the cause of women in areas underrepresented such as in the Academic JCC.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

JCC is a form of indirect participation that provides platform for information and communication at the firm level, as mentioned by Ab Rahman *et al.*, (2015). It was further elaborated that JCC is a form of formal system of communication made available in organisations between the management and employee representatives mainly to discuss the operational and strategic issues on work and work method (Marchington, 1992; Hyman & Mason, 1995; Opku and Jaja, 2014; Ab Rahman *et al.*, (2015). In this sense, Ab Rahman *et al.*, (2015) argued that the formal system is for the management and employees to meet on a regular basis in order to exchange views and utilise their members' knowledge and expertise in dealing with common interest that are not the subject of Collective Bargaining (Marchington, 1992). However, the literature does not provide a discussion on gender equality issues with regard to the key positions in decision making in organisations.

In Malaysia context, particularly in the public universities, JCC was inherited from the British administration system (Idrus 2001; Rose 2002; Parasuraman 2014). Following that, JCC has been established in all governmental departments, agencies and statutory bodies. As statutory bodies, the public universities have established the Academic JCC mainly to provide a communication platform for academics to voice their concern on work and work method matters to the management. Similarly, the women's participation in the key decision making positions were not known in the context of the Academic JCC.

JCC in Public Universities in Malaysia: Where Did All the Women Go?

The statistical report issued by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2014 indicated that women academic staff in all public universities in Malaysia. Total professors in 2013 are 2,262 and only 561 are women. While, the total of associate professors in 2013, among the 5,012, 3,086 are men and only 1,926 are women. Out of 21,384 lecturers, 11,919 are women. From the

statistical report, it can be summarised that most of the women are holding the lecturers position and they are considered as the marginalized group in terms of participation in the Academic JCCs.

A message delivered by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Research and Innovation of Universiti Malaysia Sabah on 22 February 2016 supports the above report;

“there are more women academics in the campus as compared to men”.

Despite his statement, it is very alarming that the women representation in the key positions in the Academic JCC were not equitable with the number of women in the university. This has severely resulted in cause on women are not being highlighted to the management for consideration and they become less influential in decision making. In this juncture, it is clear that women's voice is not seen as equally important to the men's. In line with that, O'Neil and Domingo (2015) highlighted a few factors that may be the cause of little women's participation in the Academic JCC. First, the stereotype thought of women on domestic responsibilities, such as after returning home from work, they will continue managing the children, do the cooking and the house chores. Second, women was always associated with handling “soft” tasks such as welfare, charity, health and education related matters. Third, underestimation on the capabilities of women in handling important and strategic decision making tasks. Finally, women are frequently prevented from holding a senior position in organisation. This is believed to be the main factor causing the women being not motivated enough to participate in the Academic JCC; thus they prefer to be as silent as possible and concentrate on their core responsibilities in performing their work in the university.

However, while women's participation rate in academic employment is increasing, there is an urgent need to give them opportunity equal to the men to participate in every endeavour undertaken by the universities. Women should be given active roles in maintaining their livelihood in a university environment in every aspect of working life, to enable them to seize the opportunity to improve their well-being in the university.

Given the situation, public universities are now in the period of transition and are challenged with issues of globalisation (Ab Rahman *et al*, 2015), and trying to find balance between government aspirations and academic livelihood. In this circumstances, when all the above mentioned are additional burdens to the academics, there is an urgent need to relook on the roles and function of women in Academic JCC in order to create a balance working environment in a public universities (Ab Rahman *et al*, 2015). Therefore, the women's participation in the Academic JCC is seen to

be the most preferable indirect participation mechanism that can be used to enhance employee engagement in organisation.

Women's participation in the Academic JCC must be given significant tasks in order to help the university to prosper. A senior professor once commented, "*management should not regard the Academic JCC as a threat, instead take them as partners in the organisation, with due respect, we are lecturers*". Taking the importance of Academic JCC into consideration, it is a high time for the role of women in the Academic JCC to move into a new dimension and direction, to work together into greater heights by means of active participation. It is significant to position the Academic JCC as an important stakeholder in the public university environment (Ab Rahman, *et al*, 2015). In addition, regardless of gender, women and men should cooperate in order to glorify the public universities.

METHODOLOGY

The research project was undertaken in a public university in Malaysia. The methodology was selected according to a qualitative case study approach, primarily using the in-depth interview technique (Kelly, 1999; Yin, 2003). Over a period of ten weeks, senior officers at the university level and a cross sectional of JCC participants were interviewed. Thirteen (13) women (academics) who are also the members of the Academic JCC were interviewed and observed. Interviews were transcribed and compiled. The secondary data was analysed, and became the focus of this paper. However, for ethical and confidentiality issues, the location of this study is kept confidential.

RESULT

This section presents the result on the role and function of the Academic JCC from (i) the management and Academic JCC perspective, and (ii) the women's perspective.

The Academic JCC has been viewed both as positive and negative mechanisms by the management of the university.

1.The role and function of the Academic JCC from the management and Academic JCC perspective

Five (5) male university officials were interviewed on the concept of EP. In general, the management view is positive. Senior Officer 1 said, "*The*

Academic JCC is a vehicle for academics to voice their concern to the management". An Academic JCC participant is of the opinion that "it is a platform for information and communication, and established to look into the welfare of the academics". However, there is a negative view from the management on the Academic JCC, stating "the Academic JCC often brought up issues related to monetary values. They are more like a little militant in this aspect", and a negative comment by an Academic JCC participant was, "JCC works very well in the private sector, not in the public sector because we cannot touch matters related to policies, regulations and management prerogatives".

2. The role and function of the Academic JCC from the women's perspective according to JCC Model

Thirteen (13) women (academics) who are also the members of the Academic JCC were interviewed. This section presents the views from the women academics on the effectiveness of the Academic JCC according to the JCC Model. Respondent 1 commented, *"we don't know what the objectives of the Academic JCC are, none of the exco-members came forward to explain on the advantages of being a member"*. Respondent 2 was of the opinion that, *"I don't know the objectives of the Academic JCC, the cause of the Academic JCC doesn't attract me at all, and hence I am reluctant to join their activities"*.

Respondent 3 said, *"I don't know about others, I don't see the importance of joining the Academic JCC. However, I help to give information if they need"*. Respondent 4 commented, *"I don't know what transpired in the meetings and definitely we were not consulted by the Academic JCC before the meetings"*. Respondent 5 stressed that, *"we only go to the AGM to collect the beautiful and cute door gifts. We don't attend the AGM"*. Respondent 6 said, *"I don't know the subject of the meeting"*. Respondent 7 on the other hand commented that, *"I don't recall that the Academic JCC consulted us before going for the meeting and "women agenda"; I don't think it has been discussed among members all this while"*. Respondent 8 viewed, *"all my matters I deal directly, what is there to consult on women issues, and they are all men"*. Respondent 9 conveyed, *"fight for the rights, struggle and argument have always been the world of men, women are too tired for that"*. Respondent 10 said, *"VC chaired all the meetings; any matters which required urgent action, VC will decide as long as it is not on policy matters"*. Respondent 11 commented, *"the real power is in the hand of the higher administration, we do nothing for sure!"*. Respondent 12 said, *"the Academic JCC is a toothless tiger, in fact they are the allies to the management"*. Respondent 13 was of the opinion that, *"I don't believe*

that the Academic JCC can fight for my rights as an academic because the top management are the members of the Academic JCC as well; conflict of interest!”

All the above situations reflect that the Academic JCC is a very weak representation (Ab Rahman *et al.*, 2015) to the women. The analysis shows most women felt the Academic JCC has not been truthful in executing its role and function; therefore it is seen as not a right platform to seek for guidance. Another important factor to note is the reason for the women to feel awkward is that some of the executive council members of the Academic JCC hold high administrative position and in this situation, conflict of interest exists. Therefore, the Academic JCC are unable to execute their responsibilities respectively.

Factors Hindering Women’s Participation in Academic JCC

In the contemporary movement of the JCC across the world, it is still a mind-boggling issue to the reasons why women in most developed and developing countries are not keen to participate in “*fighting, struggling for the rights*” alike activities. Gender equality is a global issue that need to be restored urgently.

While gender equality is the main agenda of the Trade Unions (TUs) across the globe (ITUC, 2007), there are still women out there particularly in the Malaysian context who are not keen to be part of the union activities (Ariffin, 2007). The Academic JCC in public universities is the closest example showing that most of the Academic JCC decision making positions are held by men. Practically, it was because little opportunity is given to the women to sit at the decision making positions, and the women agenda in the public universities remained unclear. However, in the context of this study, Ariffin (1997) commented, “*women are generally inactive union members because of the ways capital and patriarchy organize social production and reproduction in Malaysian society*”. Ariffin further explained that “*capital, together with the state and patriarchy, stands in the way of greater participation of women workers in unions like structures*”. At this point of juncture, most unions and union centres in Malaysia are male dominated and women issues are treated separately and should be remedied by the women representatives (if there is any). The Academic JCC are established as an alternative to the union. Because the Academic JCC is an institution in the society, as an organisation, it is very likely that they subscribe to patriarchal ideology and relations, which affect the way the Academic JCC is managed. In this situation, direct or indirectly, women are being pushed aside and see union alike structure such as “*struggle, fights for the rights are the domain of men*” thus; the silencing of the women has been succeeded subsequently.

In the context of this study, the reasons affecting weak women's participation in activities such as the Trade Unions and Work Council can best explained through the work of Mies, (1986). Mies, (1986) explained that the patriarchal system sees *"women not as workers, but housewives"*. It was further stressed that *"what they (women) do is not defined as work, but as an "activity" "*. Mies further defined that *"all the work women do whether in the formal sector is considered as supplementary work; her income as supplementary income to that the so-called main "breadwinner", the husband"*. This situation explained by Mies in 1984 still exists until today as Hora, (2014) in her study said *"in most patriarchal societies, females are regarded as the inferior of the species, that women have been denied access to both honoured utilitarian role open only to males"*.

Smith (1978) starting point of analysis is that our culture is socially constructed, and those who constructed it are dominantly men. Smith exerted, *"that is the reason for the symbols, the vocabulary, the codes of our culture reflect the standpoint of the male"*. For example, *"our laws and legal system are patriarchal; thus even now, "the voice of women is all about whisper"*. This statement clearly states that the world within is for men and that is how tradition is being built in society. As Smith (1978) said, *"The women throughout history have been marginalized or kept to the silence and traditionally were denied access to any formal education for a long time"*. Smith (1978) further explained, *"being excluded, as women have been, from the making of ideology of knowledge, and of culture means that our experience, our interests, our ways of knowing the world have not been represented in the organisation of our ruling nor in the systematically developed knowledge that has entered into it"*. Smith (1978) reiterated, *"we have as set fragmentary intuitions of an emerging female intelligentsia and the repressions of which they were subject"*.

On a serious note, Johns, (2013) highlighted on what is holding the women back. There are four categories preventing women to participate in decision making positions, including societal, governmental, internal business, and business structural barriers. Johns reiterated, these factors lead to obstacles to women's upward mobility into the desired positions. Following that, a patchwork social support system that exist impedes the women's progress *"particularly in the work-family arena"*. In addition, the lack of flexible work arrangements held the women to progress simply because they have to assume to their principal role as caregivers. On top of everything, women are burdened with unfair wage distribution compared to men. This has been a tradition and a culture is being formed in the society.

In summary, the above findings have given us some details on "how" and "why" the culture and tradition built have direct influence on the

reasons for women being not motivated enough to dwell into activities in their workplace, especially to join the unions or work councils.

Toward Better Support for Women's Participation in Academic JCC: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Johns (2013) wrote, breaking the glass ceiling is very complex in the sense that it requires action on several fronts. Johns further exerted that, the federal, state, employers, academic institutions, and women themselves are the essential players in breaking down the barriers that holding them back. As the Academic JCC represents the faculty members, they should first show examples on equal opportunity for men and women in all aspects of work. Johns argued that for a successful equality in organisations, these four methods should be considered.

- i) Having top management commitment, making it visible and supporting gender diversity as a way of life, not just series of initiatives;
- ii) Addressing women's and men's mind-set to support diversity and making the organisation care for gender equality;
- iii) Monitoring women's representatives carefully, and;
- iv) Driving their gender diversity programmes.

O'Neil and Domingo (2015) exerted, the followings should be done in order to mainstream the women in organisations.

- i) Be clear about the objectives;
- ii) Invest in women's activities and movements;
- iii) Focus on women's need, not only their ideas;
- iv) Focus on women's expertise and knowledge, and
- v) Be locally led and problem solving driven.

In the context of this study, the utmost remedial action is for the leadership to commit to strong mutual understanding in encouraging women's participation in the Academic JCC. To strengthen the JCC, the women themselves have to involve in developing the JCC strategy. The management and the Academic JCC should be able to identify the women's needs, thus the solidarity can be

seen. In the long term, by having their needs addressed, the Academic JCC will become stronger and truly representing the university environment.

Another point to consider is to regard women's issues as a top priority, including gender equality in all policies, programmes, arrangements, and activities, and to ensure equal access for women in decision making positions. In this sense, women will be attracted to participate in the Academic JCC because they could sense the commitment of the leaders on their issues. Activities conducted by women should be supported by the management and the Academic JCC leaders, especially concerning the policies in promoting equal opportunity for women in all areas of work. It is essential for the women to recognise the management and leadership support through their actions, thus receiving their support, and in return, they will naturally contribute and support back towards the organisation.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

As in the writing of O'Neil and Domingo (2015), in all patriarchal societies, particularly in extremely conservative societies, women who wish to advance gender equality need to convince the potential male counterparts, make deals, compromise, and frame issues in ways that minimise obstacles. In the modern era, particularly in Malaysian context, when more women are keen to pursue for higher education, the patriarchal ideology continue to persist, traditionally and unconsciously have placed women in great dilemma. The reasons for women being unmotivated to get associated in an establishment such as the Academic JCC vary widely. According to the authors' understanding, there are some contending issues related to women declining to hold the decision making positions in the Academic JCC, including (i) too busy with routine work related to teaching, research and publication, (ii) their work does not end there, as they have other obligation as mothers and housewives, (iii) women often get tired in the "*world of men*", (iv) holding such high position does not only add pressure to the work, but lots of stress fighting for others, time consuming for women, and (v) women, no matter how high their positions are in the university, they have other persons who have the supreme control of their life, which are the husbands. Women have always been regarded as the inferior of the species (Hora, 2014).

However, is it true in the Malaysian context, the patriarchal ideology often pushes the women aside; or is it because of the multi-ethnic composition in Malaysia that have a common tradition to undermine the contribution of women over men; or simply because the women have chosen to stay low due

to various reasons? The Malaysian government upon realising the importance of women's participation in the country has drawn a framework in the effort to mainstream the women agenda particularly as corporate leaders. Taking examples of the public sector, it is commendable that even though it was said that Malaysia does subscribe to patriarchal ideology (Ariffin, 2007), women have an equal opportunity to hold a critical position such as the Vice Chancellor position. However, the 30% quota mooted by the Prime Minister as mentioned earlier in this paper has yet to be fulfilled.

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