

Breaking the Brass Ceiling: Challenges and Opportunities for Women Leaders in Law Enforcement Agency

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Abstract

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions within law enforcement agencies, where institutional culture continues to be predominantly male-oriented. This study aims to examines the challenges encountered by women officers in advancing to leadership roles within law enforcement agencies. Using a qualitatively designed, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten women officers to explore their experiences and perceptions. The analysis identified three main challenges impeding women's advancement: cultural and societal expectations, work-life balance constraint, and inadequate organisational support. These factors collectively reflect the persistent influence of gendered norms and structural barriers in law enforcement contexts.. To promote gender equity, the study highlights the need for systematic interventions, including regular organisational audits, revised policies, mentorship programmes, training programmes and targeted leadership development initiatives. The findings further substantiate the applicability of Role Congruity Theory in explaining the gendered dynamics of leadership advancement within male-dominated institutions. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender equity in law enforcement agencies and underscores the importance of institutional transformation to support women's empowerment and equitable representation in leadership positions.

Keywords: Women's Leadership, Cultural, Societal Expectations, Work-Life Balance, Organisational Support, Law Enforcement

Introduction

Women's participation in leadership has steadily increased worldwide, yet significant gender disparities persist, particularly in traditionally male-dominated professions such as law

enforcement. According to the World Economic Forum (2023), women occupy only one-third of leadership positions globally, reflecting the continued barriers that constraint their advancement. In Malaysia's public sector, for instance, male employees continue to dominate top positions such as Public Sector Super Scale Grade C (JUSA C) and above (Public Service Department, 2020).

Based on the number of female students being almost equal to that of male students in schools and the number of female students exceeding male students in higher education institutions in Malaysia, it does not show the same trend when it comes to the workplace. In 2023, only 55.8% of Malaysian women were part of the labour force, compared to over 82% of men (Department of Statistics, 2020). While women hold approximately 42% of decision-making roles in the public sector, top positions such Directors, Commissioners or Secretary General are still predominantly occupied by men (Public Service Department, 2020). This disparity is especially evident in law enforcement, where leadership is always associated with physical strength, assertiveness, decisiveness and masculine norms that ascribed to men's traits. Such gendered perceptions have reinforced enduring stereotypes that question women's sustainability for leadership and hinder their professional career growth (Othman et al 2023, UNODC, 2021).

From a broader social science perspective, this issue aligns with debates on gendered power structures, institutional bias, and role congruity. The Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) provides an explanatory framework, positing that societal expectations about femininity often conflict with traditional gender stereotypical attributes of effective leadership, leading to prejudice and underrepresentation. This theoretical lens remains highly relevant in contemporary discourse on gender and organisational leadership, especially in professions where masculinity is deeply embedded within institutional culture (Wolfram et al., 2020; Al Naqbi, 2023).

Despite a growing body of literature on women's leadership, research on the intersection between gender, culture, and institutional structures in law enforcement remains limited, particularly in the Malaysian and Southeast Asian context. Prior studies (e.g., Puteh et al., 2018; Ahmed et al., 2023) have identified gender bias, work-life conflict, and inadequate organisational support as barriers, yet few have examined how these challenges manifest in the lived experiences of women officers navigating male-dominated environments. This gap underscores the need for a deeper qualitative exploration of the cultural, organisational, and societal dynamics that shape women's leadership trajectories within law enforcement agencies.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by women officers in attaining leadership roles within Malaysian law enforcement. By examining these experiences through the lens of Role Congruity Theory, the study contributes to the wider discourse on gender equity, institutional transformation, and inclusive leadership in public service. Understanding these dynamics is critical not only for advancing gender equality in law enforcement but also for informing broader social policy reforms aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Research Questions

To address the research problem and deepen the understanding of women's underrepresentation in leadership roles within law enforcement, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do gender bias and stereotypes influence women's career advancement into leadership positions within law enforcement agencies?

RQ2: How does the struggle to maintain work-life balance shape women officer's capacity to pursue and sustain leadership roles?

RQ3: What organizational practices and support act as barriers to women's leadership development in law enforcement?

RQ4: What strategic measures can be implemented to promote gender equity, inclusive leadership and institutional transformation in law enforcement agencies?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Societal and Cultural Barriers

The increasing number of women joining the public service has not translated into proportional representation in leadership roles. A significant barrier to women's advancement is the persistent stereotype of men as ideal leaders (Othman et al., 2023). This entrenched belief undermines women's capabilities and limits their opportunities for career progression. Research by Smith and Sinkford (2022) further highlights the systemic biases that favour male candidates. Additionally, Ahmed et al. (2023) found that women officers often face multiple challenges, including gender bias, inadequate training and resources, limited career guidance, and a lack of trust and cooperation from male colleagues.

Deep-rooted gender roles and expectations can limit women's opportunities for professional growth and development. Al Naqbi (2023) emphasises that gender bias is a major obstacle for women aspiring to leadership positions. Despite societal and cultural shifts, women continue to face challenges in achieving gender equality, particularly in leadership roles. While women have made significant strides in education and career advancements, societal biases and stereotypes persist, hindering their progress. Despite of their achievements, they often face unequal treatment compared to men. This is particularly evident in leadership roles, where women are frequently doubted and underestimated.

However, women bring unique perspectives and skills to leadership positions, contributing to more diverse and effective organisations. As Saucedo (2018) argues, gender diversity in leadership can lead to better problem-solving and decision-making. Additionally, research by Rief and Clikinbeard (2020) suggests that while women may feel less belonging within their work groups, they are often well-suited to their roles.

While global initiatives like the UNDP's goal of 50% of women in leadership positions by 2050 are promising, significant challenges remain. Adongo et al. (2023) highlight the impact of conventional gender roles, cultural values, and family responsibilities on women's leadership aspirations. Mokhtar (2020) and Hirschman (2016) further emphasise the influence of patriarchal beliefs on women's participation in leadership roles, particularly in conservative societies. Addressing societal biases, promoting gender equality in education and workplaces, and providing adequate support and mentorship for women aspiring to leadership positions are crucial to overcoming these challenges.

Work-Life Balance Challenges

Women in law enforcement face numerous challenges in pursuing leadership positions. One significant hurdle is balancing work and personal commitments. As Zainal and Yusoff (2020) highlight, women often struggle to manage both professional and domestic responsibilities, which can hinder their career progression. Societal expectations, particularly the "motherhood norm" (Drago, 2007), further exacerbate this issue. Women are expected to fulfil both paid work and unpaid domestic duties, making it difficult to devote adequate time and energy to their careers. The demanding nature of law enforcement, with its long hours and irregular shifts, compounds these challenges. Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2002) emphasise the impact of time commitments on work-family conflict, particularly for police officers, who often struggle to balance their professional and personal lives. Moreover, cultural and organisational factors can hinder women's advancement. Male-dominated cultures and traditional gender roles often isolate women officers and neglect their needs. Limited support and attention can lead to demotivation, work-family conflict, and a decreased likelihood of pursuing leadership opportunities.

Al Naqbi (2023) highlights the conflict between professional responsibilities and domestic roles, which can make it challenging for women to take on leadership positions, especially those requiring long hours and travel. Hochschild (2003) emphasises the additional burden of domestic responsibilities faced by women in law enforcement. Woosley (2010) further highlight the negative impact of domestic and maternal responsibilities on career advancement. O'Hara (2009) found that female police officers in Ireland often face difficulties in career progression due to family obligations and perceived biases.

Addressing the root causes of work-life imbalance is crucial to overcoming these challenges. This includes promoting flexible work arrangements, providing adequate childcare support, and challenging gender stereotypes. By creating a more supportive work environment, law enforcement agencies can empower women to achieve their full potential and assume leadership positions.

Organisational Barriers to Women's Leadership

Various organisational challenges often hinder women's advancement to leadership positions in law enforcement. One significant barrier is the prevalence of office politics and management practices that can marginalise women and limit their opportunities for career advancement. Sowmya et al. (2022) highlight the negative impact of organisational politics on women leaders, suggesting that many women either adapt to these dynamics or leave the organisation to seek better opportunities. Additionally, Smith et al. (2021) and Abdul Rahman et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of effective networking for career advancement. Women often face challenges in building strong professional networks, which can limit their access to valuable mentors and opportunities.

While Chang et al. (2021) suggest that mentorship relationships can benefit women's career development, Blumane and Timpars (2021) note that poor networking opportunities can hinder access to such relationships. Moreover, gender bias and stereotypes can create a hostile work environment for women in law enforcement. Mohd Saipuddin et al (2021) stress the importance of organisational support and gender-inclusive policies in empowering

women. However, women in male-dominated fields often face gender inequality and a lack of support from supervisors (Holland & Eaton, 2020).

Despite advancements in employment equality, gender disparity persists in leadership roles, particularly in law enforcement. While women have made progress in the workplace, there remains a significant gap in research on women's leadership in law enforcement. Further research is needed to challenge existing assumptions and explore ways to improve the current situation for women in law enforcement.

Role Congruity Theory

Role congruity theory suggests that women may face challenges in leadership roles due to societal stereotypes and expectations. Eagly and Karau (2002) posit that perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles can lead to prejudice against women leaders. This prejudice can manifest in two ways: (1) Negative perceptions of women as leaders: Women may be perceived as less suitable for leadership roles compared to men; (2) Negative evaluations of women's leadership behaviour: Women's leadership behaviour may be evaluated more negatively than men's, even when they exhibit similar qualities and skills.

These biases can hinder women's advancement to leadership positions and negatively impact their effectiveness as leaders. In the context of law enforcement, role congruity theory can help explain the challenges women face in achieving leadership roles. The traditional masculine stereotypes associated with law enforcement can create barriers for women, who may be perceived as less capable or less suitable for leadership positions.

Wolfram et al. (2020) argue that the perceived mismatch between feminine gender roles and masculine leadership roles can create conflicts that hinder women's progress. Women leaders may be subjected to heightened scrutiny and criticism, and their leadership abilities may be questioned based on gender stereotypes. Addressing gender biases and stereotypes is crucial to creating a more equitable and inclusive workplace. By challenging traditional gender roles and promoting diversity and inclusion, organisations can empower women to reach their full potential and assume leadership roles.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences and challenges faced by women in law enforcement in attaining leadership roles during one month of data collection. A qualitative approach was selected as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences.

Participant Selection

Ten women officers from law enforcement agencies in Sarawak were selected using purposive sampling. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. Female gender
2. At least five years of experience in law enforcement
3. Currently holding a leadership position within their organisation

A pilot study was conducted with two women officers to refine the interview protocol and ensure data quality.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in both English and Malay, allowing for flexibility while ensuring that key themes were addressed. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within the data. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, inter-rater reliability was assessed between two researchers, ensuring consistency in theme identification and interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data.

Result and Discussion

Participant Profile

The study involved ten women officers from various ranks within the Sarawak Police Force. The majority of participants were in the ranks of Inspector and Assistant Superintendent, with years of service ranging from nine to twenty-eight years. Nine of the ten participants were married with children, while one participant was unmarried. Most participants held leadership positions, heading specific departments or units within their respective organisations.

Table 1

Demographic Background

No.	Age	Ranks	Years of Service	Married/ Not married	Children
1.	48	DSP	28	Married	4
2.	40	ASP	21	Married	3
3.	39	ASP	20	Married	3
4.	40	ASP	20	Married	3
5.	42	ASP	20	Married	5
6.	40	ASP	20	Married	3
7.	36	INSP	9	Married	1
8.	34	INSP	9	Married	2
9.	38	INSP	14	Married	5
10.	33	INSP	9	Not married	0

Challenges in Attaining a Leadership Role

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings are organized into themes aligned with the research questions. The three main

challenges are viewed from the perspectives of culture and societal expectations, work-life balance constraint and inadequate of organisational support.

Research Question 1

Theme 1: Culture and societal expectations

Implicit bias favouring men and societal expectations were identified as two subthemes to be discussed in the context of culture and societal expectations

Sub-theme 1: Implicit Bias Favoring Men

The statement that women are still being related to domestic and long-held cultural responsibilities points to a persistent societal issue that significantly impacts women's advancement in various sectors, including law enforcement. These stereotypes, often rooted in traditional patriarchal norms, create implicit biases that influence perceptions of women's capabilities and suitability for leadership roles, which are often seen as requiring traits traditionally associated with masculinity, such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority.

Always being compared to men leaders as being strong and firm, women leaders are often assumed to be soft and unable to make firm decisions. (Informant 1)

Being a woman in leadership means competition. It is a competition against previous men's leadership and being able to do as well as them, at least. (Informant 3)

Men leaders can fit more readily into positions and are easier to frame; women, on the other hand, must prove themselves before they ever get there. (Informant 5)

Leadership roles are better suited to men, because women do not make tough decisions well. (Informant 7)

The results highlight the possibility of women's leadership being underestimated because of these implicit biases compared to their male counterparts. Schunemann (2020) conducted a fascinating study to examine the way culture affects women in leadership. The study argues that women do not see equitable opportunities to advance into leadership and, echoing prior studies points to cultural stereotypes and biases as the primary reason. That assumes women are less appropriate leaders than men. This reinforces the traditional gender role and represses women's possible advanced careers.

Sub-theme 2 : Societal expectations as barriers

The analysis suggests that long-standing cultural assumptions, prejudice and patriarchal practices may still be one of the main obstacles affecting women seeking a career in law enforcement particularly among Asian countries. Feedback from informants in some way explained that society has a negative impact on this leadership and women's matter. These informants believe that they have done their best and deserve to be recognised, however, the advantages are not as much as being male leaders. In addition, eight out of ten informants mentioned the false image of female leaders to be one of the causes. Seven out of ten informants discussed how society negatively impacted their work by receiving little recognition and either male or female colleagues making decisions based on assumptions.

Do you know this women and kitchen thing? The folks always said that what the use of higher education if you are “belonged” to the kitchen? We still have this even if we are working and are in the position men are always seen to be in. Now, this perception needs to be improved instead of vanishing because we are established working women who do not forget our responsibilities to be better caregivers for our family.” (Informant 10)

The thing with society is that you need to have the complete package to get to the position; you need to be beautiful, you need to be this, and you need to be that. However, after all, the never-revealed reason we women can be in the position is because we work hard for it, and we are transparently qualified for the position. That was it; no assumed complete package was needed. Men, on the other hand, always preferred to be one. (Informant 9)

The findings show larger societal stereotypes and expectations that are still stifling the progress of women seeking leadership roles. As highlighted by Hoshchild (2003) and Othman et al. (2023), figures seem to suggest that women are expected to function traditionally as child-bearers or homemakers due to deeply set cultural norms surrounding leadership roles being intrinsically connected with men.

The study findings reveal that all respondents, in some way, attributed the difficulties women officers face in maintaining leadership positions to the negative impact of societal perceptions and the preference for male leaders. This pervasive bias against women in positions of authority is a significant barrier that the informants have experienced in various forms throughout their careers. The most cited example was the lack of recognition and legitimacy accorded to women leaders as compared to their male counterparts.

It was extremely hard for me to come out of it. I would still outperform the men I worked with, who were often promoted over me...because they could see leadership and potential in each other so much easier than hiring women (Informant 1).

There is still a prevailing sense that the qualities of leaders are simply more masculine in character and women inherently less equipped to handle these strenuous burdens as they simultaneously fulfil their obvious responsibilities. (Informant 3).

The lack of recognition and the preference for male leadership create substantial barriers to women's advancement and longevity in these positions, requiring them to constantly prove their worth and overcome the ingrained assumptions about their leadership abilities. According to a study by the Pew Research Center Survey in 2015, out of 7917 women police officers, 43% of respondents felt that the men in their department are treated better than their female counterparts regarding assignments and promotions (DeCruise, 2020). The study highlights the need for a multifaceted approach to address these systemic issues, including targeted interventions to challenge and dismantle the underlying patriarchal structures, promote gender-inclusive leadership development programs, and foster a more equitable and supportive organisational culture that values the contributions of women leaders.

Research conducted by Othman et al. (2023) supports the notion that the stereotype of men as ideal candidates for leadership roles acts as a barrier to women's advancement. Furthermore, Othman et al. (2023) highlighted the very importance, considering the emphasis

is on the need to dare and demolish these stereotypes for the purpose of encouraging gender equality and thus creating a more comprehensive as well as thorough environment for everyone to participate and work together. The study highlights that organisations and society should actively participate in breaking down these barriers by welcoming and embracing women to leadership positions, considering their skills, capabilities and high potential to lead their people. Besides that, a study by (Smith & Sinkford, 2022) is also one of the important studies eliminating the barriers that men are always right for the job more than women are. The authors stressed that by overcoming the myths that men are always suitable for the job, negative attitudes and related barriers will promote cultural shifts and eliminate stereotypical beliefs that women are not suitable for leadership positions.

All the challenges discussed earlier have, to some extent, affected the presence of these women officers, especially in the aspect of career development. The findings from the study suggest that women officers often face significant barriers to career advancement too within law enforcement agencies as the profession is traditionally male-dominated and viewed as more suitable for men.

"We need more women police officers in every department of the force. There should be more of an obvious number of women police officers in senior positions for the purpose of creating a cycle where these women police officers can be the role models and mentors to guide other women police officers to climb the career ladder." (Informant 5).

"I have seen more male officers being promoted to senior positions. I do not know the real reason why, not to blame anyone, but maybe we women are less than the number of male officers in this force. Therefore, less opportunity is given to us." (Informant 6)

This suggests that gender biases and stereotypes persist, leading to women's capabilities being overlooked or undervalued, even when they have proven their abilities. These insights underscore the need for law enforcement organisations to critically examine their promotion and advancement practices to ensure they are free from gender bias and provide equal opportunities for qualified women officers to ascend to leadership positions. This is supported by Malhotra (2018), stressing that cultural and social norms ignite gender bias and stereotypes, causing women to face challenges, especially in career advancement to leadership roles.

Research Question 2

Theme 2: Work-Life Balance

With the growing number of women in leadership, work-life balance has transformed itself into a self-help industry with strong zeal over the past few years. The findings below indicate the struggles of balancing work, family and personal commitment.

My husband is also an important person in his organisation. However, he manages to do his professional work accordingly and is the head of the family equally. I believe it is because of me being able to manage our family. Nevertheless, when it comes to my turn, I feel that there is something not equal; I must make some sacrifices, either in limiting my professional commitments or domestic responsibilities. I often, in this situation, choose either one. (Informant 2)

I believe I am doing well as a leader, wife, and mother. It depends on your physical and mental consciousness. I admit that I am tired and sometimes out of a solution, but I must survive. (Informant 4)

I still remember the previous leader, who was a male leader, said to me, "Yes, family is the priority, but as we are in the force, we have somehow lived with it." For me, it is true, but some of us are continuously tied with managing our husbands and kids. It seems that women are trained to survive in any situation. (Informant 8)

The results elucidate the ongoing struggles that women police officers experience both in their professional duties and private lives. The data also echoes what is already known in the literature (Zainal & Yusoff, 2020), that women often bear a significant portion of family and household responsibilities, which perhaps translates into less time for leadership development. Consistent with the argument by Hochschild (2003), the effect of the "second shift" creates another conflict in balancing both commitments to work and family, which also results from a patriarchy-based situation. These findings have consistently shown that work and family commitments are obstacles for women officers who aspire to become leaders, like in other countries in the West.

Research Question 3

Theme 3: Inadequate Organizational Support

Unclear leadership guidelines for women and mentorship programs are scarce or inaccessible were identified as two subthemes to be discussed in the context of inadequate organizational support.

Sub-theme 1: Unclear leadership guidelines for women

All the informants were unaware of any existing policy or guidelines supporting women leadership pathways.

"If only there was this paperwork that obliged the participation of women in leadership in this structure of the organisation, I believe my ability and capability as a leader would never be compared to previous male leaders. Yes, I am not directly criticised, but often I come across this: "This Tuan before did a great job". At least with this paperwork, more participation of women leaders". (Informant 6).

"If they want something like men leaders' contributions, then train us to be one, give us good examples and support us rather than believing in the idea of comparison. We should develop together and equitably contribute to the agency together". (Informant 3).

These findings are consistent with previous research by Mohd Saipuddin (2021) and suggest that without these formal supportive structures in organisations, women leaders may find it difficult to succeed even when they have the required credentials and competencies.

Sub-theme 2: Mentorship Programs are Scarce or Inaccessible

The lack of mentorship opportunities hindered women's leadership development.

"We need more women police officers in every department of the force. There should be more of an obvious number of women police officers in senior positions for the purpose of creating a cycle where these women police officers can be the role models and mentors to guide other women police officers to climb the career ladder." (Informant 5).

"I have seen more male officers being promoted to senior positions. I do not know the real reason why, not to blame anyone, but maybe we women are less than the number of male officers in this force. Therefore, less opportunity is given to us." (Informant 6)

Overall, the findings from this study provide insights regarding an array of multiple dimensions (cultural, individual-personal, as well as social-environmental) that confront women officers in their journey towards leadership positions. These challenges highlight a more comprehensive approach to women in policing focused on disrupting long-standing cultural stereotypes, addressing concerns about work-life balance, changing societal norms and ensuring that there is strong organisational support. Identifying and tackling these intersecting barriers will help establish a culture that not only opens the door for women to become leaders but also truly values their voices in building the future of policing.

Strategies for advancement in leadership role

Research Question 4

The study's final findings include three recommendations for promoting gender equality and inclusive leadership practices within law enforcement agencies.

Sub-theme 1: Regular Audit of Promotion Data

Six of the informants stressed that regular audits should be conducted by the relevant personnel and department regarding the promotion data.

"The relevant personnel from relevant departments should do frequent and regular audits of the promotion data. By doing so, then they will know the actual situation on the ground. I believe this should be done as soon as possible". (Informant 1).

"There should be regular audits and meetings done so that everyone knows the involvement of every gender in certain positions." (Informant 2).

"The relevant departments and personnel should study this promotion or career advancement. The results should be presented during relevant audits and frequently highlighted in every promotion data meeting. Just my suggestion." (Informant 3).

As this finding illustrates, regular, data-driven reviews of promotion outcomes are essential for identifying disparities and driving meaningful change. By making this a standard practice, law enforcement agencies can hold themselves accountable and continuously improve their efforts to foster gender-inclusive leadership. This proactive approach not only highlights the importance of gender representation but also fosters systematic changes that support the advancement of women, especially within law enforcement agencies.

Sub-theme 2 : Revised policies

The informants also suggested that more initiatives should be taken, either through policy involvement or organizational interventions. All the informants were unaware of any existing

policy that supported women leaders and of being one, as they were all requesting guidelines or supported documents and rules to establish these women leaders as equitable to men leaders.

“Currently, do we have a transparent policy in terms of guidelines, rules or those documented ones that prioritised us as established women leaders in this law enforcement agency? I believe that if we even have this policy, can we consider it to be transparent and able to be practised in this agency? Make us a genuine one (policy), and we shall be powered by this and feel the fairness.” (Informant 8).

“If only there were this paperwork that obliged the participation of women in leadership in this structure of the organisation, I believe my ability and capability as a leader would never be compared to previous male leaders. Yes, I am not directly criticised, but often I come across this: “This Tuan before did a great job”. At least with this paperwork, more participation of women leaders”. (Informant 6).

Sub-theme 3 : Mentorship and Training Program

While many of the informants supported a transparent policy, six raised the issue of the importance of mentorship and training programs initiated for women leaders.

“If they want something like men leaders’ contributions, then train us to be one, give us good examples and support us rather than believing in the idea of comparison. We should develop together and equitably contribute to the agency together”. (Informant 3).

Another concern raised by half of the informants is organisational support. Importantly, the attitudes and behaviours of an organisation's top leaders and managers play a central role in cultivating this type of supportive culture. These informants believe that organisational support starts from the superiors and is the root of creating equitable leadership.

“I am still young and need more experience in this position. However, I gained support from my superiors, and I believe any women police officers from different departments that hold this position also need this kind of support.” (Informant 10)

The results of this study are quite consistent with the role congruity theory, which suggests that societal expectations about gender roles may interfere with women's leadership. The theory posits that when women are ambitious and seek power positions, they come into conflict with traditional gender roles because men expect women to be compliant. These findings also highlight the considerable difficulty women experience when trying to juggle both professional and domestic roles, a dynamic that is often referred to as the “second shift. This notion shows that most of the work in household and caregiving provisions was accomplished by women, mainly those who are married and have career goals. This leads the role congruity theory to suggest that this dual burden highlights perceptions of women being less committed at work than men. This stereotyping, as stated by Wolfram et al. (2020), can lead to conflicts that make women's career progress stall out and invalidate the development of already appointed female police officers. This imbalance between societal prescriptions and individual ambitions, in the end, limits women officers' route to leadership, hence

demanding more systemic changes that will facilitate their professional growth with a less gendered imprint.

Implications, Recommendations and Conclusions

Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to role congruity theory by highlighting the persistence of gender biases and stereotypes in law enforcement. The study also expands the theory's applicability by demonstrating its relevance in explaining the interplay between societal norms and organizational barriers in leadership progression.

Organizational Implications

The law enforcement agencies must recognize and address the unique challenges faced by women officers. The findings emphasize the importance of creating inclusive policies, providing mentorship opportunities, and establishing transparent promotion criteria to support women's leadership development. Policymakers and practitioners should be able to revise and develop effective necessary action from these findings to promote the equality of gender and leadership in line with national policy and the target of SDG 5 (gender equality).

Practical Implications

The study provides actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners aiming to achieve gender equity. By implementing flexible work arrangements, institutionalizing gender sensitivity training, and creating support systems for work-life balance, agencies can foster a more equitable and productive work environment.

Societal Implications

The information and knowledge gained from this study should be able to increase awareness among society on the ability of women leaders to lead, especially in the male-dominated sector. Ultimately, another implication of this study is to increase awareness that male and female leaders generally share similar values and beliefs about female leadership effectiveness and capabilities.

Recommendations

Organizations

The results underscored the need for law enforcement entities to develop and implement inclusive policies designed to minimise gender bias and promote leadership advancement.

i) Regular audits for promotion equity

Routine audits of promotion data are essential for identifying and addressing gender disparities within law enforcement agencies. These audits should be conducted semi-annually and include detailed analyses of gender representation at various leadership levels. The findings must be transparently shared with stakeholders, including department heads and policymakers, to ensure accountability and drive actionable change.

ii) Development of inclusive policies

Departments need to develop and implement clear, gender-inclusive policies that are transparent across the board and explicitly define women officers' contributions as

invaluable. These policies should be disseminated widely within the organization to foster a culture of inclusivity and awareness.

iii) Leadership development programs

Mentorship programs tailored to women in law enforcement can significantly enhance their career development. Senior female leaders should be paired with aspiring officers to provide guidance, share experiences, and build confidence. In addition, leadership training programs focusing on skills such as decision-making, conflict resolution, and strategic thinking should be implemented. These programs must be accessible to all eligible officers and designed to address the unique challenges faced by women in the field

Moreover, young women trying to make their way up in the professional world should never feel like they are being short-changed or unduly ignored. By investing in targeted leadership development programs and mentorship initiatives that lift these future leaders upward through more formal training opportunities, organisations can adequately demonstrate an unwavering commitment towards helping groom tomorrow's next generation of female industry icons.

Policy Maker

The findings in this analysis reinforce the immediate need for leadership among both national and subnational policymakers to address gender equality specifically within law enforcement executive levels. Effective strategies could include requiring periodic and in-depth organisational assessments to expose if there are any gender-specific recruitment, promotion or professional development imbalances. Transparent and fair guidelines is necessary, in which consider the specific contribution of women officers, thereby levelling the playing field in promotion.

Future Research

Future research could benefit from conducting more longitudinal studies on the career progression of women officers spanning several years. These serve to fulfil the aim of providing important information about how differences in policy adoption are related to long-run progress, retention and job satisfaction. Second, a new study that focuses on the empowerment of women in the Malaysian leadership should be multi-faceted. This should involve qualitative assessments of organisational culture to reveal implicit biases, rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness or performance improvement opportunities in existing leadership development programs and training systems, and an examination into why women officers leave, stay or be promoted. It is hoped that through this extensive research agenda, scholars might offer valuable responses to drive sustainable systemic change and help Malaysian women flourish in senior leadership positions.

Limitations

The study is limited to law enforcement agencies in Sarawak, which may not fully represent the experiences of women officers in other regions or sectors. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings

Conclusion

This study underscores the significant challenges faced by women in law enforcement leadership. Systematic bias and reinforced gender norms work together to imprint the belief that women are not fit for leadership. In addition, they face unique challenges of work-life balance and organisational as well as societal obstacles obstructing their career growth. Addressing these barriers through targeted interventions can foster gender equity and enhance organizational effectiveness. The findings also highlight the importance of systemic changes in cultural, organizational, and policy practices to create inclusive environments that support women's leadership aspirations.

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