GENDER BIAS IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA: COMPARING PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS’ JOB FUNCTIONS, INCOMES, AND CAREER PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Today, there is an increase in women working outside their home to sustain themselves economically and socially, but the working experiences can be problematic for women when gender discrimination exists in the workplace. In the early 1960s, women were entering the public relations industry at a rate faster than their male counterparts, but gender bias was a sore issue in the industry. Numerous studies have been conducted on gender bias, and the findings indicate that female public relations practitioners receive unequal treatment in their organisation. For that reason, this study investigated whether gender bias exists in the public relations industry in Klang Valley, Malaysia, and if so, what the impact was on the practitioners’ work performance. The study used an in-depth interview with five public relations practitioners from public relations agencies and corporate companies. Feminist Standpoint Theory served as a framework for this study. Results revealed that in Malaysia, gender bias is not prevalent because of cultural diversity and company policies. The priorities of these public relations agencies and organisations favor employee’s performance and competence over gender. The results also indicated that public relations practitioners are treated fairly in areas of career prospects, job functions, and remuneration.

Keywords: gender bias, public relations industry, female, employee performance.

INTRODUCTION

Over the decades, women have made significant progress in securing employment in professions and managerial jobs that were previously dominated by men. However,
women tend to experience greater working disadvantages based on gender, such as higher rates of unemployment, greater likelihood of being assigned work in support positions, and lesser chances of being promoted in the company in which they are working (Hall et al., 2011). Gender bias refers to attitudes and behaviors that contribute to stereotyping women (Ogiwara et al., 2008), resulting in prejudice, mistrust and discrimination, as well as workplace bullying of working women (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Gender bias exits in both public and private sectors (Kim, 2014), and women often experience bias and discrimination in workplace.

According to the Tenth Malaysian Plan (2011), Malaysian women represent 46% of the working population, and although they are academically qualified, they are still underrepresented in top management with respect to job functions, income earned, and career prospects. In 2008 only 6.1% of women were corporate directors and 7.1% were CEOs, while from 2005 to 2009 female board representation in government-linked companies was between 11 and 14%.

Due to greater access to education and training, women working in the Malaysian public relations industry strive to improve themselves by obtaining essential qualifications in the hope of securing a better job. This inclusion of women in the public relations industry has increased over the decades, and a shift is seen today in the number of women in the profession. Nevertheless, men still dominate the managerial positions. Given the same education level and working experience, women face more challenges in advancing their careers in public relations.

Literature Review

Gender Bias in the Workplace and Public Relations (PR) Industry

In the span of a decade, many studies have been carried out to investigate gender bias in workplaces, and simultaneously these studies suggest that the problem of gender bias remains an issue for women. According to Crawley (2014), occupational devaluation by gender continued to decline over the last 20 years. Even though gender concentration in specific jobs has risen, employment in specific occupations has become less dominated by gender. In Pakistan, women have limited opportunities to obtain an education let alone a professional degree. Due to their educational levels, women have limited career opportunities in management and leadership positions as compared to men. Women also face the problem of pay gap regardless of their education, age, race, and occupation in the United States (Kelsey, 2013).

The term “gender bias” in the workplace is credited to several authors to signify the underrepresentation of women in top management. According to Fain (2011), only 16.4% of the corporate officers in Fortune 500 companies were female. Smith et al. (2012) also pointed out that there is a strong indication of women gender inequality in leadership positions in countries Australia, China, France, South Africa, United Kingdom, and the USA. Despite the growing number of women in the work force and the dramatic increase of women in lower and mid-level management positions, the percentage of women attaining top management positions has continued to be relatively small (Dimovski, Skerlavaj, & Mok, 2010).

Studies suggest that a woman’s gender may impede her chances of climbing the corporate ladder, and it is important to unveil the factors behind it. Several studies suggest that because men and women have different career needs and goals, these
aspirations can serve as a basis for discrimination. Gyllensten and Palmer (2005) report that women who are employed in an organisation that practices gender bias culture have lower salaries, less opportunity to promoted, and lower positions as compared to men who have the same educational background and work experience. According to Shaffer et al. (2000), women with a college education take home paychecks similar to men with high school education in the United States. Dimobski, Skerlavaj and Mok (2010) note that gender differences exist in the promotion to senior management levels while Velenziano (2014) claims that gender directly affects promotion decisions by organisations’ top management. This supports the argument that gender differences are a contributing factor to gender bias as they occur in upper levels of management. Although gender differences may vary across countries and cultures, it is undeniable that this unjust treatment has created problems for women in the workplace. Bonachristus and Ojiakor (2012) noted that gender bias exists in the public relations (PR) industry regardless of income level, job position, or career prospect. This also affects leadership in the PR industry which in turns influences personal decisions, work-life balances, and performance (Jacqueline, 2008). This study also indicated that in organisations, PR male practitioners frequently occupy top management positions due to their ability to interact and make non-emotional decisions. Antoinette (2014) noted that male and female PR managers perform similar duties in PR-related work but command different salaries because of gender. Apart from gender differences, there are some other barriers to women progressing in the PR industry. Among the identified barriers are lack of respect from their male colleagues and insufficient support of women’s multiple roles in the PR organisation (Kiaye & Singh, 2013). Besides that, an overwhelmingly traditional male-dominated culture also creates barriers for female PR practitioners in their career advancement. Valenziano (2014) claimed that power and political issues within the workplace can prevent the promotion of female PR practitioners to leadership positions. Power is used to gain authority over equality and access to resources. As such, female PR practitioners are often powerless, especially when they lack support and information as a result of coercive power in organisations.

**Public Relations in Malaysia**

Public relations in Malaysia began in the early 1920s and the development of public relations can be divided into three stages: (a) PR before independence, (b) PR after independence, and (c) PR in the new era (Tong, 2012). The Malaysian government used PR as a tool to disseminate information about government policies to the public. During the before and after independence stages, communication was only one-way, from the government to the public. In 1926, the Information Agency of the Malaya States was formed to carry out PR functions for the government. After the Japanese occupation of Malaysia, the government established the Department of Publicity and Printing in September 1945, to operate radio broadcasting and printing materials. Subsequently, both departments merged in 1950 and became known as Departments of Information (Baharum, 2011). After independence, these departments began to carry out more functions, such as obtaining the people’s support and participation in order to implement government programs.
The introduction of Vision 2020 by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir, has opened up opportunities for the development of public relations in the private sector. The addition of new media along with traditional media has also provided a new chapter in the development of public relations in Malaysia. Many companies have started to establish PR departments in their organisations, and new PR agencies have emerged in the private sector. More PR courses are offered in universities today producing more PR practitioners in Malaysia.

Research Problem

The 1900s witnessed an influx of women into the PR industry, venturing beyond the traditional occupational fields considered “feminine” such as teaching and nursing. However, in any field that shifts from male to female domination, problems of dwindling status and salary become pervasive (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). Numerous studies have been conducted to identify how gender affects the PR profession. The issue of remuneration is one such concern for female PR officers (Cline et al., 1986) as they receive lower salaries, have less opportunities for management positions, and are less favoured than their male counterparts during the hiring process, even though women comprise almost 70% of the PR practitioners of the PR industry.

Many studies on gender bias in the PR industry were conducted in the United States of America and other countries, while only a limited number of studies were conducted in Malaysia. As such, this study aims to examine gender bias towards female PR practitioners in Malaysia in terms of incomes, roles, functions, and career prospects. Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap in the literature, examining the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. What are the different roles and functions between male and female PR practitioners in organisations?

2. Are income levels and career prospects in PR different due to gender differences?

3. Does gender bias exist in the PR industry in Malaysia, especially in the Klang Valley?

Methodology

A face-to-face semi-structured interview was conducted with PR practitioners in agencies and departments in corporate companies in the Klang Valley region. The two most important advantages of using semi-structured interviews are generating in-depth detail and accurate response from the interviewees. The interviewees were able to answer the questions quickly and needed little guidance. This method also helped in clarifying ambiguous questions and eliminating confusion. The interviews were conducted with five PR practitioners averaging 45 to 60 minutes in length. Three female and two male PR practitioners participated in the interviews. All interviewees were PR practitioners with at least three years of working experience in their respective companies and PR agencies in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.
Results and Discussion

All the interviewees were well aware of the gender bias definition: bullying due to gender differences, sexual assault, the act or belief in the superiority of men over women, sexual discrimination, and unequal treatment in employment opportunities in the industry. In addition, all the interviewees also mentioned that gender bias results in unequal treatment in a workplace with women being the usual victims. This bias could be due to gender, race, culture, or level of education and may cause conflict among the team members in an organisation. The fact that all interviewees had a basic conceptual understanding of gender bias increased the validity of the interview.

Different roles and functions between male and female PR practitioners in organisations

All interviewees believed that men were more capable in the Malaysian PR scene, leading them to occupy top positions in organisations. Male PR practitioners were thought to contribute in business-oriented leadership, which means they are more confident in completing a task and have better communication skills when dealing with their clients. Therefore, men were apt to move up the corporate ladder as they handle tasks better than their female colleagues. However, the interviewees also believed that any female PR practitioner with the same abilities will receive equal opportunities from the organisations.

Decision making is important to predicting problems or resolving issues in any organisation. Male PR practitioners are mainly in top managerial positions because they are able to make swift decisions. They also make good, calculated judgments during a crisis. Additionally, they are calm in critical situations and are able to handle the media in case of any untoward incidents. Furthermore, male PR practitioners do not mix emotions with decisions thus ensuring rational output. The interviews also reveal that most female PR practitioners have better capacity in communication, planning, and implementation but not in decision making. They are able to translate the planning into actions by writing, organizing events, or handling social media. Female PR officers are more people-oriented and this may affect their emotions in the workplace. Several issues addressed by the interviewees were “female PR are often stereotyped as being too emotional to make calculated decision,” “they tend to be more emotional when it comes to handling issues,” “female PR become very delicate and fragile under pressure,” and “female PR are always being generalized as mixing emotions into every account.” All these issues prevent female PR officers from moving upward in their careers or from holding managerial posts in PR organisations.

Besides that, family responsibility is a priority for women resulting in few of them holding the reigns in the PR industry. The interviewees revealed “young PR female who have young children are often chided as incompetent and denied leadership roles very often at work,” “the incapability to handle both family and career efficiently,” “family pressure,” “pregnancy,” “juggle their roles of being married women/mother at the same time being in the workplace,” “voluntary resignation due to family commitments,” and “prioritizing family” were the reasons why female PR practitioners were not given the same roles and functions as male PR practitioners. The field of public relations requires long working hours, sometimes well into the night, which is why many women are not willing to hold high positions in organisations.
Income level and career prospects show no significant gender difference

In the PR industry, there is little evidence of wage inequality from the organisations because of gender. All interviewees agreed that regardless of gender, PR practitioners receive the same amount of remuneration for the same job. Income is determined by position, quality of work, performance, respect of the timeline, efficient work completion, diligence, and effort, but it is not due to gender. This shows the organisations or PR agencies in Malaysia prioritize work aptitude in granting the same salary to employees regardless of gender.

In the area of career prospects, male practitioners face challenges due to their attitude and educational level. The majority of male PR practitioners hold a diploma qualification, and they are less aggressive than female PR practitioners in completing a given task. Women complete tasks accurately within deadlines and are more meticulous in their work compared to men. Moreover, more women are university graduates with higher qualifications in the field of public relations in Malaysia.

Nonetheless, PR practitioners have equal opportunities in career prospects in terms of training and in upgrading their skills and knowledge. Organisations will send their practitioners for training regardless their gender. According to the interviewees, fair treatment is given for income and opportunity in their workplace, and an organisation evaluates PR practitioners based on their effort, profile, and ability.

Gender bias in the PR industry in Malaysia

Although numerous studies argued that gender bias in the PR industry is evident, this study discovered that all interviewees agree that little gender bias exists in the PR industry in Klang Valley, Malaysia. They do not experience prejudice in roles, functions, salaries, or career prospects. This study shows that PR departments and PR agencies reward a PR practitioner based on eligibility and not on gender. Most senior positions are held by men because they are able to execute tasks better than female PR practitioners. Nevertheless, if a woman demonstrates the same competencies, the company will not hesitate to offer her the position. This indicates that companies give priority to the organisational development and not to the gender selection. However, some organisations are male-oriented with top positions for men. These organisations have a policy that the post may only be held by male PR practitioners. In this situation, it is not difficult to say whether the organisation discriminates against women.

One of the important techniques in PR is to develop good relations with internal and external publics. Regardless of gender, PR practitioners must develop the capacity to develop and maintain good relationships with them. Practitioners will try to achieve a company’s goal and target based on their capacity and ability but not their gender. Multiple skills such as writing, media relations, creativity, research skills, and competence in social media will be rewarded by PR departments or agencies with job offers regardless of gender.

Recommendations for Minimizing Gender Gaps

One of the purposes of this research was to allow the interviewees to openly share their thoughts and ideas on how to minimize gender gaps in the PR industry in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Gender gap refers to the difference in the attitudes, behavior, and abilities of men and women (Collins, 2015). One interviewee recommended that “the
organisations should emphasize on the importance of employee equality in the workplace. When development and promotion opportunities are given based on merit instead of gender, “prohibits any form of gender discriminations when it comes to hiring and hire the right ratio of male and female employees in workplace”.

Several MAIN recommendations were given, such as:
- Establish personnel policies which clearly address gender equality and the penalties for any act of offense or discrimination
- Provide equal opportunities for employees to prove themselves regardless of gender and reward all employees fairly according to their efforts without gender bias
- Give equal amount of workloads, salaries, and promotions
- Promote a gender equal workplace through corporate culture
- Have a fair ratio between male and female in both upper and lower management stated in the corporate policy
- Mentoring programmes for young PR practitioners

Female PR practitioners have the ability and strength to survive in the PR industry, as it is a people-oriented industry, with a small number of them holding top management positions. In summary, all the interviewees agreed that gender bias occurs in workplaces but is minimal in the field of public relations in Malaysia.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify gender bias in the public relations industry in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Although many studies have suggested that gender bias is rampant in the PR industry, the findings of this study indicate that most of the female PR practitioners in Klang Valley, Malaysia, do not perceive themselves to face much bias due to their gender. Besides that, these working female PR practitioners have a working experience that is not perceived to be lacking in promotion, career advancement and opportunities, or is stereotyped as incompetent in the department or the agency.

The lack of perceived gender bias in the workplace for female PR practitioners in Klang Valley, Malaysia, does not suggest that no gender bias exists in the workplace. This is because four interviewees are from female-dominated PR departments and agencies. A larger sample size may yield very different results and is suggested for future research.
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