

# A phenomenological investigation of career stagnation among Indonesian women

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## A phenomenological investigation of career stagnation among Indonesian women

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative study investigates the antecedents of career stagnation among female senior staff in an Indonesian non-profit, religious-based organization. Following the rise of women leadership in Indonesian organizations, knowledge about the condition of women leadership in Indonesia is lacking. Using a phenomenological approach, this study interviewed eight senior female staff working in two Indonesian zakat foundations to gain insight about their leadership capability and career advancement opportunities. The findings of this study revealed the influence of individual, social and preference factors towards career advancement and promotion to leadership position. Implications for human resource practice were discussed.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Women's involvement in Indonesia's labor market has increased over the years. Based on the data released by the International Labour Organization, 38% out of 127 million workers in Indonesia are women (International Labour Organization 2016). This is in line with the data released by Statistics Indonesia (2016), which demonstrated that women's workforce has increased from 42.668.611 in 2015 to 45.468.346 in 2016. Despite an increase in the number of women within the workforce, it seems that the opportunity for women to rise to managerial positions in Indonesia is still limited. The lack of appropriate qualifications was argued to be the main barrier for women to rise to managerial positions (Bjerk 2008), along with the discrimination within the performance evaluation system among men and women (Jogulu & Wood 2008).

### 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The glass ceiling phenomenon refers to any barrier hindering the career advancement of women (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995). Laksanti et al. (2017) investigated the glass ceiling phenomenon in Indonesian private and public organizations, and their findings demonstrated that the glass ceiling was considered absent. The participants could not recall any kind of action or policy that hindered their career advancement in the past. Yet, all of them were still 8 to 9 levels below the CEO within the organization's career path despite the fact that they would retire within 5 to 7 years. Laksanti et al.'s (2017) findings might be caused by the ability of Indonesian women to cope with the glass ceiling, which made them feel that they have never experienced it.

Research findings from other South-East Asian countries have also revealed that there were specific factors contributing to the women's career advancement. According to Li and Leung (2001),

Singaporean women faced stereotyping problems from the society, as well as organizational factors such as promotion policies from the companies. More than a decade afterwards, many Singaporean women still have to leave their work permanently due to the responsibilities of motherhood (Yoon 2015). In Malaysia, the antecedent of the glass ceiling was the perception that women's leadership was considered less effective compared to men's (Jogulu & Wood 2008). The glass ceiling phenomenon in Thailand is more complex since women have to face individual, interpersonal, organizational, and society problems to advance in managerial positions (Napasri & Yukongdi 2015).

The glass ceiling is also present in South Asia and Arab countries. In Sri Lanka, the main factors contributing to glass ceiling are individual factors, such as the lack of confidence and negative perceptions towards working women in which they were considered manipulative and emotional (Bombuwela & De Alwis 2013). Furthermore, there was a traditional belief that women would not be able to replace men as the bread winner. Thus, Sri Lankan women would always face difficulties from the society when they want to pursue their career (Bombuwela & De Alwis 2013). In Bahrain, the lack of education, skills and inability to cope with work-family conflicts caused women to experience the glass ceiling (Pillai et al. 2011). Nevertheless, based on Al-Manasra's (2013) study in Jordan, the glass ceiling effect toward women could be minimized with support given by the family and society.

Despite the vast literatures on the glass ceiling in Asia, there was a gap where previous research has tended to focus on the glass ceiling investigation in for-profit organizations. We decided to do the opposite—investigate the glass ceiling in the non-profit sector. According to The White House Project, 73% of the nonprofit organizations' employees are women, women comprise only 11% of leadership in the nonprofit sector (The White House Project 2009).

Among nonprofit organizations in Indonesia, we focus our attention to investigate the glass ceiling in Indonesian zakat foundations. The importance of zakat foundations in Indonesia is vital, since almost 90% of the country's total population is Muslim. In Islam, "zakat" is the terminology referring to individual obligation to donate some of an individual's wealth for charitable purposes. In many cases, zakat is donated through a zakat foundation where it will be distributed to those in need. According to a 2016 report, the zakat potential in Indonesia was equal to almost USD 21 billion (Republika 2017). Additionally, our preliminary interviews of 10 women working in the three largest Indonesia zakat foundations revealed the fact that the amount of salary received by zakat foundations' employee were lower compared to those working in the private sector or government institution. Interestingly, our participants' career was stagnant for years, yet they chose to remain working in the organization. Thus this study raised several questions: (1) does the glass ceiling phenomenon happen in Indonesian zakat foundations? and (2) what is the antecedent of women's career stagnation in Indonesian zakat foundations?

### 3 RESEARCH METHOD

The participants in this study were eight senior female staffs working in two zakat foundations. All participants were currently in the managerial position, ranging from line to middle manager. The names of the participants and the zakat foundation were made into pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and encourage participants to provide truthful information about their experience and their organization. All participants have experienced career stagnation for more than five years in their current organization. Snowball sampling technique was used to get access to the participants who fulfilled the established criteria and were willing to allocate time for the interview. The first participant who agreed to participate was Helen, who referred us to her co-workers from her current and past organizations. The interview processes were conducted after working hours, at a place according to the participants' preference. In total, each interview lasted for 60–80 minutes and was documented using voice recorders. The interview data were transcribed and analyzed to construct the themes and unveil the barrier toward career advancement as experienced by each participant. For the interview, we developed 34 questions based on the previous research on the glass ceiling (e.g., Al-Manasra 2013; Bombuwela & De Alwis 2013; Napasri & Yukongdi 2015). Each interview

was opened by explaining to respondents the definition of the glass ceiling. Afterwards, we asked each interviewee questions and continued based on the answer of the participants toward the first question which asked about their self-reflection of their career stagnation.

#### 4 FINDINGS

Based on the interview results, one of the antecedents of the **women's career stagnation in the Indonesian zakat foundations** was caused by their role. Participants admit that as women, it was easy for them to express their emotion and feelings. The job responsibilities in zakat foundations require the participants to be able to establish a good relationship with clients, either the donor or the zakat recipients. The job sometimes could be very stressful, which made them annoyed, especially during their period.

There were another two participants who believed that the nature of women could hinder their career advancement. They believed that their superiors would prioritize men over women, since men were considered more rational and emotionally stable. Such an opinion was supported by Bompuwela and De Alwis (2013), who argued that the characteristics of women could lead to the superior's unwillingness to give more responsibilities to the female employees. However, some participants reminded us that women who are able to cope with such a problem could still get the promotion.

Another antecedent of the career stagnation among women in the zakat foundation was due to their unwillingness to be transferred to another organization's subsidiary for promotion. There were differences in the promotion policy among profit and non-profit organizations. In profit organizations, staff must not repudiate the promotion, even though they have to leave their hometown and family. In the zakat foundations, such a policy was non-existent. Five participants in this study were offered a position as a branch manager in another city within the same province. Nevertheless, their husband did not give permission and asked them to reconsider the promotion. There were consequences when accepting the promotion, mainly because they have to be away from their family for a long time.

Our participants feel that they have the responsibilities to raise and educate their children. The remaining participants who have never been offered promotion during their career admitted that they have felt comfortable with their current position so they do not have any intention to be promoted. The increased age and the responsibilities as a mother have made them reluctant to accept larger responsibilities, or to learn something new.

The third finding of this study was related to the patriarchal culture of the Indonesian society. In a patriarchal society, the men's role is considered more important than women. This is interesting, since according to the Indonesia's national culture assessment (Hofstede et al. 2010); Indonesia was considered as a feminine society where the difference in roles among men and women could be minimized. Our participants, however, showed their preference for a male leader. When asked about the appropriateness to select women as their superior, six out of eight participants disagreed. They felt that a male superior could lead better and more rationally in terms of the superior-subordinate relationship. It was interesting to note that all participants were feeling uneasy when having women as their leader, since they were afraid that women could be emotional and give too much interference on their privacy. Although no participants mentioned the obligation to select a male leader based on religious teaching, they did mention that as long as there were still male candidates for promotion, they would choose not to take leadership responsibility.

The last finding was related to the participants' ability to cope with work-family conflict and family-work conflict. When asked whether their career stagnation was caused by their inability to cope with the work-family or family-work conflict, no participants stated their agreement. They said that they have been able to balance between career and family, although in the past such conflict did happen. Humaira, a front office staff working at Izzatul Ummat, stated that after marriage, there was a period in which she could not maintain her usual work rhythm and once was reprimanded by her boss.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In summary, we conclude our findings as follows: (1) the organizational barrier for women's career advancement in the zakat foundations was not present. The barriers were mainly caused by individual and social roles, and preference factors. (2) The antecedents of women's career stagnation from individual factors were emotion, sensitivity, lack of motivation, ambition and unwillingness to take the leadership position. For social factors, a patriarchal culture affects women's perception to prioritize males for leadership positions. A preference factor was identified since women in this study give priority to their family over their work, refusing promotion due to their role as mother and wife. (3) Participants' unwillingness to lead was not due to religious value, as none of the participants mentioned the role of men and women in Islam.

Our findings could be used as the basis for the recruitment and selection decision. Organizations must prepare a tailored career path for women once they get married and have children. Furthermore, it would be better if working women could be placed in the same location where their family live. They should also be prepared to take leadership positions only in the particular office where they work, to minimize the concern and conflict from themselves and their family. Obviously, the career path and the amount of compensation must be made clear during the selection interview. Future research could investigate the glass ceiling and women's career stagnation in other Indonesian provinces, considering the cultural diversity of the country which comprises more than 30 large ethnic groups (Statistics Indonesia 2011).

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