Navigating Barriers to Career Advancement: Challenges Faced by Malaysian Women in the Workforce

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the various social, political, organizational, economic, and psychological challenges that Malaysian female employees face in the labor sector. A qualitative approach and case study design were employed, using purposive sampling and in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five female informants from diverse occupational backgrounds. The findings reveal four critical challenges faced by the informants: social, political and organizational, economic, and psychological. Social challenges include traditional gender expectations, family caregiving responsibilities, cultural judgment, and religious considerations. Political and organizational challenges include limited access to government programs, workplace policy gaps or biases, the negative impacts of maternity leave, and limited flexible work arrangements. Further, economic challenges include economic stability issues, rising cost of living, pressure from financial responsibilities, and limited access to high-growth career opportunities. Lastly, psychological challenges include problems such as low self-confidence, fear and self-doubt, stress, and guilt. The findings show that these challenges restrict women's professional progression and work-life balance because they are interrelated and firmly ingrained in societal, political, organizational, and economic institutions. To promote the professional growth and well-being of Malaysian women, the study emphasizes the need for structural changes, inclusive workplace regulations, and greater socio-cultural awareness. To enhance gender equality in the workforce, recommendations include expanding flexible work arrangements, eliminating unconscious gender biases, and fostering supportive organizational environments.

Keywords: Malaysian women, career development, gender equality, work-life balance, organizational support

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, women's participation in the labor force in Malaysia has increased considerably. Women today work not only in traditionally female-dominated sectors (education, healthcare, services), but also increasingly in a variety of industries and managerial positions. However, despite these gains, many female employees continue to face structural, social, economic, and psychological barriers that constrain their career decisions, career progression, and long-term development. Empirical studies have documented persistent obstacles, such as gender stereotypes, glass-ceiling effects, work-life-family conflict, and organizational culture bias, that hinder women's career advancement (Moorthy, 2022; Nur Azam & Arumugam, 2023).

In this context, it becomes important to examine not only whether women are present in the workforce but also how their lived experiences, shaped by family responsibilities, cultural expectations, economic pressures, and personal motivations, affect their career trajectories. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to ensuring that women's labor force participation translates into genuine career growth and empowerment, not simply employment.

In particular, among female employees across different occupations, there is a need to understand how a combination of social, economic, cultural, organizational, and psychological factors influences their career decisions. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the challenges faced by Malaysian female employees across diverse sectors.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increased female labor participation, traditional gender roles in Malaysia continue to shape women's career decisions. Research over the past decade shows that Malaysian women often bear a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, caregiving duties, and social expectations to prioritize family over professional growth (Rahman et al., 2020). These cultural norms restrict their ability to pursue demanding jobs, accept promotions, or relocate for career advancement. This phenomenon is especially evident among women in lower- and middle-income occupational groups, where family responsibilities strongly influence employment stability (Moorthy, 2022). Understanding these social pressures is essential to identifying how they limit women's career development.

Many Malaysian female employees face workplace challenges such as limited opportunities for career progression, a lack of flexible working arrangements, gender discrimination, and insufficient support for work-life balance. Recent studies reveal that women experience the "glass ceiling" phenomenon due to biased organizational cultures and unequal access to mentoring and leadership opportunities (Mokhtar, 2020). Additionally, long working hours, rigid schedules, and inadequate childcare support further restrict women's full participation in the workforce. These barriers occur across both public and private sectors, affecting women's job satisfaction, mobility, and job tenure. Addressing these issues requires understanding how organizational structures directly impact women lived experiences.

Economic pressures also play a major role in shaping women's career decisions in Malaysia. The rising cost of living, wage gaps, and family financial responsibilities create additional burdens for many working women. Studies show that women often earn less than men and have fewer opportunities in high-paying sectors (Moorthy, 2022). These economic factors influence whether women stay in their current jobs, switch careers, or choose stability over advancement. Understanding these pressures is important for improving women's financial independence.

In addition to external challenges, psychological factors affect women's career development. Many women experience self-doubt, fear of failure, impostor syndrome, stress, and emotional exhaustion in their work lives (Alias et al., 2025). These psychological pressures often combine with workplace and family responsibilities, making it harder for women to pursue new opportunities or leadership roles. For example, women who juggle work and caregiving may feel overwhelmed, which reduces motivation and confidence. Understanding these psychological challenges helps explain why some women stay in stable but less competitive jobs despite having the skills to advance.

Research Objective

The study aims to achieve the following objective:

1)   To explore the challenges faced by Malaysian female employees.

Significance of the Research

This research studies the real-life challenges encountered by Malaysian female employees across different occupations and work environments. As women continue to play an increasingly important role in the Malaysian labor market, it is crucial to understand the social, cultural, economic, and psychological pressures that shape their career decisions and professional development. The findings from this study can provide valuable insights into the actual experiences, struggles, and coping strategies of working women, allowing for a better understanding of the conditions under which they make career choices.

This research is also valuable to policymakers, employers, and organizations in designing more effective gender-responsive strategies and workplace practices. This study could lead to more informed improvements in areas such as flexible working arrangements, family-friendly policies, fair compensation, and workplace mental health support. This will provide the organizations with the support they need to better support women's participation and retention in the labor force. For example, identifying how caregiving responsibilities or rising living costs influence women's job decisions can guide the development of targeted interventions. In addition, the study can

help highlight the importance of inclusive leadership and equitable career advancement opportunities, especially in sectors where women remain underrepresented.

Furthermore, this study offers meaningful contributions to academic research by providing qualitative insights into the day-to-day realities of Malaysian female employees, an underexplored area. It provides essential data on the intersection of gender, work, and personal life, highlights gaps in existing knowledge, and suggests areas for further investigation in women's career development. Its findings can shape future gender studies, contribute to policy debates, and support more comprehensive frameworks for understanding women's roles in the workforce. Theoretically, it will enrich discussions on gender inequality, work-life integration, and the socio-cultural dynamics that influence women's career trajectories in Malaysia. Future researchers can build on these findings to examine larger populations, specific sectors, or comparative studies across countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Traditional Gender Expectations

Traditional gender expectations remain deeply embedded in Malaysian society and continue to shape women's participation and advancement in the workforce. Gender role theory suggests that women are socially conditioned to prioritize caregiving and domestic responsibilities, while men are expected to focus on career advancement and financial provision. These expectations shape organizational norms and managerial perceptions, often leading to women being viewed as less suitable for leadership positions.

Othman et al. (2023) highlight that women leaders in Malaysia frequently encounter gendered assumptions that undermine their authority and competence. Similarly, studies on women's employment in Southeast Asia indicate that gender norms restrict women's occupational choices and reinforce occupational segregation, particularly in leadership and technical roles (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011). These norms contribute to slower career progression and reduced access to decision-making roles for women, even when qualifications and performance are comparable to those of men.

B. Family Caregiving Responsibilities

Family caregiving responsibilities remain one of the most significant challenges to women's careers. Women are disproportionately responsible for childcare, eldercare, and household management, leading to role overload and work–family conflict. In Malaysia, caregiving responsibilities often intensify after marriage or childbirth, placing additional strain on women's time and energy. For instance, a study conducted by Aazami et al. (2015) demonstrates that work–family conflict among Malaysian working women is strongly associated with reduced psychological well-being and increased emotional exhaustion. Supporting this, Noor (2004) found that Malaysian women who experienced high levels of family interference with work reported lower job satisfaction and higher stress levels. These studies suggest that caregiving responsibilities not only affect career decisions but also undermine long-term mental health and professional sustainability.

C. Cultural Judgement Toward Women's Careers

Cultural judgment toward women who prioritize their careers continues to shape women's workplace experiences and self-perceptions. Women may face criticism for deviating from traditional expectations of femininity, motherhood, and marital roles. Such judgment often comes from family members, colleagues, and the wider community, making it difficult to ignore.

Othman et al. (2023) notes that women leaders in Malaysia experience heightened scrutiny and social resistance, particularly when occupying male-dominated roles. Similarly, Adisa et al. (2024) argue that societal expectations in collectivist cultures intensify moral judgment toward women's career ambitions, framing ambition as selfish or inappropriate. These cultural pressures can lead women to internalize doubt, moderate their aspirations, or avoid leadership roles altogether.

D. Religious Considerations in the Workplace

Religion plays a major role in shaping women's identities, values, and career decisions in Malaysia. Religious

beliefs often provide emotional strength and moral guidance, yet they may also intersect with cultural norms that reinforce traditional gender roles. In some contexts, religious expectations influence women's perceptions of appropriate work environments and leadership roles.

Othman et al. (2023) discusses how religious interpretations may indirectly influence organizational cultures and expectations of women's behavior. Supporting this, Tariq and Syed (2017) found that Muslim women professionals often negotiate between professional aspirations and religious expectations, especially in mixed-gender or socially intensive work settings, and that these negotiations can constrain participation in networking, leadership roles, and international assignments.

E. Limited Access to Institutional Support

Institutional support mechanisms such as childcare facilities, parental leave, and family-friendly policies are critical for sustaining women's employment. However, access to such support is often inconsistent across organizations and sectors. When institutional support is lacking, women are left to manage work–family conflict individually.

Aazami et al. (2015) highlight that insufficient organizational support exacerbates stress and psychological strain among Malaysian women. In addition, Allen et al. (2012) argue that perceived organizational support significantly predicts work–family balance and employee well-being. Without adequate institutional backing, women may experience burnout, reduced productivity, and eventual withdrawal from career advancement opportunities.

F. Workplace Policy Gaps and Biases

Despite formal equality policies, gender bias persists in workplace practices. Bias may manifest subtly through assumptions about women's commitment, leadership ability, or availability, particularly after marriage or childbirth. These informal biases often undermine the effectiveness of formal policies.

Poon and Leeves (2022) provide empirical evidence of gender discrimination in Malaysia's labour market, demonstrating that women receive fewer interview callbacks than men with identical qualifications. Additionally, Nur Azam and Arumugam (2023) identify organizational culture and implicit bias as key barriers to women's career advancement in the Malaysian private sector. Such biases reinforce psychological barriers, including fear of rejection and reduced self-confidence.

G. Maternity Leave and Career Impact

While maternity leave policies are intended to protect women, they may unintentionally contribute to career penalties. Women returning from maternity leave may face reduced promotion prospects, skill depreciation, or altered job responsibilities. These outcomes reflect the broader "motherhood penalty" observed in many labour markets. Work–family conflict research indicates that motherhood intensifies role strain and career disruption (Aazami et al., 2015). International study further suggests that women often experience slower wage growth and reduced leadership opportunities after childbirth (Correll et al., 2007), a pattern likely relevant in the Malaysian context, given prevailing gender norms.

H. Flexible Work Arrangements

Flexible work arrangements are increasingly recognized as essential for supporting women's career sustainability. Flexibility allows women to manage caregiving responsibilities while maintaining professional engagement. However, the effectiveness of flexible arrangements depends on organizational culture and managerial support. Wijayanuddin and Zulkifly (2021) found that inflexible workloads significantly contributed to burnout among Malaysian female teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Kossek et al. (2010) argue that flexibility without cultural acceptance can increase stigma and career penalties. Thus, flexibility must be supported by inclusive workplace norms to be effective.

I. Income Stability and Career Choices

Income considerations strongly influence women's career decisions, particularly in contexts where women

contribute significantly to household finances. Women may prioritize stable employment over advancement opportunities due to financial responsibilities and risk aversion. Studies done by Aazami et al. (2015) and Greenhaus and Allen (2011) demonstrate that women are more likely than men to prioritize job security, driven by greater economic vulnerability and family caregiving obligations. As a result, income considerations often constrain women's career mobility, particularly those in caregiving roles, leading them to remain in stable but lower-growth occupations over the long term.

J. Rising Cost of Living

Rising living costs increase financial pressure on working women, especially those supporting families. Economic stress interacts with work-family conflict to heighten psychological strain and constrain career choices. Women may prioritize job security and steady income over personal fulfilment or career growth. Research on financial stress and well-being indicates that economic pressure is associated with increased anxiety, reduced life satisfaction, and impaired decision-making, which further limit women's career flexibility (Diener et al., 2018; Noor, 2004).

K. The Pressure of Financial Responsibilities

Women's financial contributions to households are substantial, yet domestic responsibilities often remain unequally distributed. This dual burden intensifies work–family conflict and reduces recovery time from work-related stress. Aazami et al.'s (2015) study shows that women experiencing high work-family conflict report lower psychological well-being. Supporting this, Greenhaus and Allen (2011) argue that an unequal distribution of roles exacerbates emotional exhaustion and limits long-term career engagement.

L. Limited Access to High-Growth Career Opportunities

Women's access to high-growth and leadership-oriented roles remains constrained by organisational culture, limited training opportunities, and career interruptions. Nur Azam and Arumugam (2023) identify structural and cultural barriers that restrict women's upward mobility in Malaysia's private sector. Additionally, women may self-select out of high-growth opportunities due to anticipated role strain or organizational resistance, reinforcing gender segregation at senior levels (Eagly & Carli, 2008).

M. Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is a critical psychological determinant of career ambition. Repeated exposure to bias, limited recognition, and heightened scrutiny can erode women's self-confidence over time. Othman et al. (2023) note that women leaders in Malaysia face disproportionate evaluation pressures, which may negatively affect self-perception. Bandura's (2000) self-efficacy theory further explains how mastery experiences strengthen confidence, while repeated setbacks weaken it.

N. Fear and Self-Doubt

Fear of failure and self-doubt discourage women from taking career risks such as applying for promotions or transitioning into new fields. Gender-based discrimination legitimizes cautious decision-making and reinforces self-protective behaviors. Poon and Leeves (2022) demonstrate that structural discrimination makes fear of rejection a rational response rather than an individual weakness. This fear limits experimentation, innovation, and aspirations for leadership.

O. Stress

Work–family conflict is strongly associated with stress, burnout, and reduced psychological well-being among Malaysian women. Aazami et al. (2015) and Wijayanuddin and Zulkifly (2021) both report significant links between role overload and emotional exhaustion. Chronic stress undermines cognitive functioning, motivation, and long-term career sustainability, making mental health a critical factor in women's employment trajectories.

P. Guilt

Societal expectations for women to excel simultaneously in professional and family roles generate persistent

psychological pressure. Women may experience guilt, emotional fatigue, and self-blame when unable to meet these competing demands. Othman et al. (2023) argues that such expectations are embedded within social and organisational structures, reinforcing invisible emotional labor and internalized stress.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and perceptions of Malaysian female employees across different states. A qualitative research approach is the most appropriate method because this research aims to understand complex social and workplace issues, such as gender bias, work-life balance, discrimination, career advancement, and organization support through the personal narratives of women. The goal is to gain in-depth insights into how these challenges are encountered in various contexts. To achieve this, the study uses a phenomenological research design, which focuses on how people interpret and perceive their daily work experiences. This design enables researchers to gather detailed, descriptive, and meaningful information about the challenges female employees face and their impact on their personal and professional lives in the workplace. Additionally, by doing this, researchers can understand how these experiences influence and shape both their career journeys and personal lives.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

Sampling is the process of selecting a representative sample from a larger population to estimate the population's parameters or characteristics (Gentles et al., 2015). It allows researchers to gather insights into the characteristics, experiences, and opinions of the entire population without collecting data from every individual, which is time-consuming and impractical. The choice of sampling method is based on the research objectives, the type of data required, and the characteristics of the specific population, to ensure the selected informants can provide meaningful and informative data for the study.

In this study, purposive sampling is used to select the sample. It is a non-probability sampling technique used to select informants who can provide in-depth insights into the challenges faced by Malaysian female employees. This approach is suitable because it better aligns the sample with the research's aims and objectives, which focus on individuals with direct experience of workplace issues, thereby improving the data's trustworthiness (Campbell et al., 2020). To be specific, a criterion sampling technique was used to select informants who met specific criteria, such as Malaysian females working in the Malaysian labor sector. To capture diverse perspectives across regions and fields, informants were selected from various Malaysian states. The sample size was determined using the saturation principle, which ceased data collection once no new themes or insights emerged (Tarnoki & Puentes, 2019). As a result, five informants participated in this study.

TABLE I DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE INFORMANTS

Informant's Pseudonym	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	26	45	24	33	51
Place of origin	Padang Besar, Perlis	Batu Pahat, Johor	Klang, Selangor	Kuala Lipis, Pahang	Kuala Lumpur
Place of residence	Bayan Baru, Penang	Yong Peng, Johor	Klang, Selangor	Kuala Lipis, Pahang	Kuala Lumpur
Type of Area	Rural	Semi-Urban	Urban	Rural	Urban
Ethnicity	Chinese	Chinese	Malay	Malay	Malay
Religion	Buddhism	Buddhism	Islam	Islam	Islam
Marital Status	Single	Single	Single	Single	Married
Current No. of Children and/ or Dependents	2 (parents)	1 (mother)	0	0	5

Highest Level of Education and Field of Study	Diploma, Business	Diploma, Early Childhood Education	Diploma	Master of Arts in World Literature	Bachelor's degree
Current Occupation and Position Level	Purchasing administrator	Kindergarten Administrator	Accounting assistant	Teacher / senior leader team	Human resource manager
Type of Employment	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
Years of service	2 years	20 years	3 years 6 months	7 years	2 years
Occupational Sector	Private	Private	Private	Government	Private
Range of income per month	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,851-MYR10,970	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,850 and below	MYR4,850 and below

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the five informants involved in this study, illustrating variations in age, places of origin and residence, type of area, ethnicity, religion, educational background, occupation, years of service, occupational sector, and monthly income range. All informants are female, aged 24 to 51, reflecting a diverse range of life stages and work experiences.

Geographically, the informants originate from different states in Malaysia, namely Perlis, Johor, Selangor, Pahang, and Kuala Lumpur. Their current residences include Penang, Johor, Selangor, Pahang, and Kuala Lumpur. The informants reside in different areas, including rural, semi-urban, and urban settings, which provide varied contextual backgrounds that influence their lived experiences.

In terms of ethnicity and religion, two informants are Chinese and practise Buddhism, while three informants are Malay and Muslim. Regarding marital status, four informants are single, and one informant is married. The number of dependents varies across informants, ranging from none to five, including parents and children.

Educational attainment among the informants ranges from a diploma level to a master's degree. Their fields of study include business, early childhood education, literature, and general diploma qualifications. Professionally, the informants are employed in diverse occupations, such as purchasing administrator, kindergarten administrator, accounting assistant, teacher, and human resource manager. All informants are employed full-time.

The years of service among the informants range from two to twenty years. Four informants are employed in the private sector, while one informant works in the government sector. In terms of income, four informants fall within the low-income group (MYR4,850 and below), while one informant belongs to the middle-income group (MYR4,851-MYR10,970). Overall, the informants' demographic diversity provides a comprehensive representation relevant to the objectives of this study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with the selected informants. Based on their availability and convenience, the informants were free to choose the date, time, and location of the interviews. Most interviews were conducted in comfortable, informal settings, such as cafés or quiet indoor spaces, to create a relaxed environment that encouraged open and honest sharing of experiences.

Prior to each interview, the researchers provided the informants with the Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form, and interview protocol. This step ensured that the informants fully understood the study's purpose, scope, and procedures. They were also informed of their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily, the confidentiality of their information, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. All data collected was assured to be used strictly for academic purposes.

The interview protocol consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended questions focused on collecting demographic information, such as gender, age, places of origin and residence, type of area, ethnicity, religion, marital status, number of dependents, educational background, occupation, years of service, occupational sector, and monthly income range. Meanwhile, the open-ended questions were designed to elicit in-depth responses aligned with the study's main objective: exploring the challenges faced by Malaysian female employees.

With the informants' consent, audio recorders were used during the interviews to capture the information shared accurately. All informants agreed to the audio recording. The interviews were conducted in English and, when necessary, in the informants' native languages to facilitate clearer expression and richer narratives. Each interview session lasted approximately 1 hour.

Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, all audio recordings from the interview were transcribed verbatim to preserve the original meanings of the informants' responses. This step was essential to maintaining the authenticity of the qualitative data. The complete set of interview transcripts was carefully read and reviewed multiple times to develop a deep familiarity and an overall understanding of the data. After that, a manual coding process was carried out, highlighting sentence sections from transcripts and assigning short labels or codes to describe their content. All of the meaningful statements, keywords, and ideas related to the research objective were identified, highlighted, and grouped into initial codes. These initial codes were further organized into key themes through thematic analysis, in which several codes were combined into a single theme. Thematic analysis helps to identify common threads that span an entire interview (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Hence, this systematic procedure enabled the researchers to interpret patterns, similarities, and differences across the data and to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the main challenges faced by Malaysian female employees.
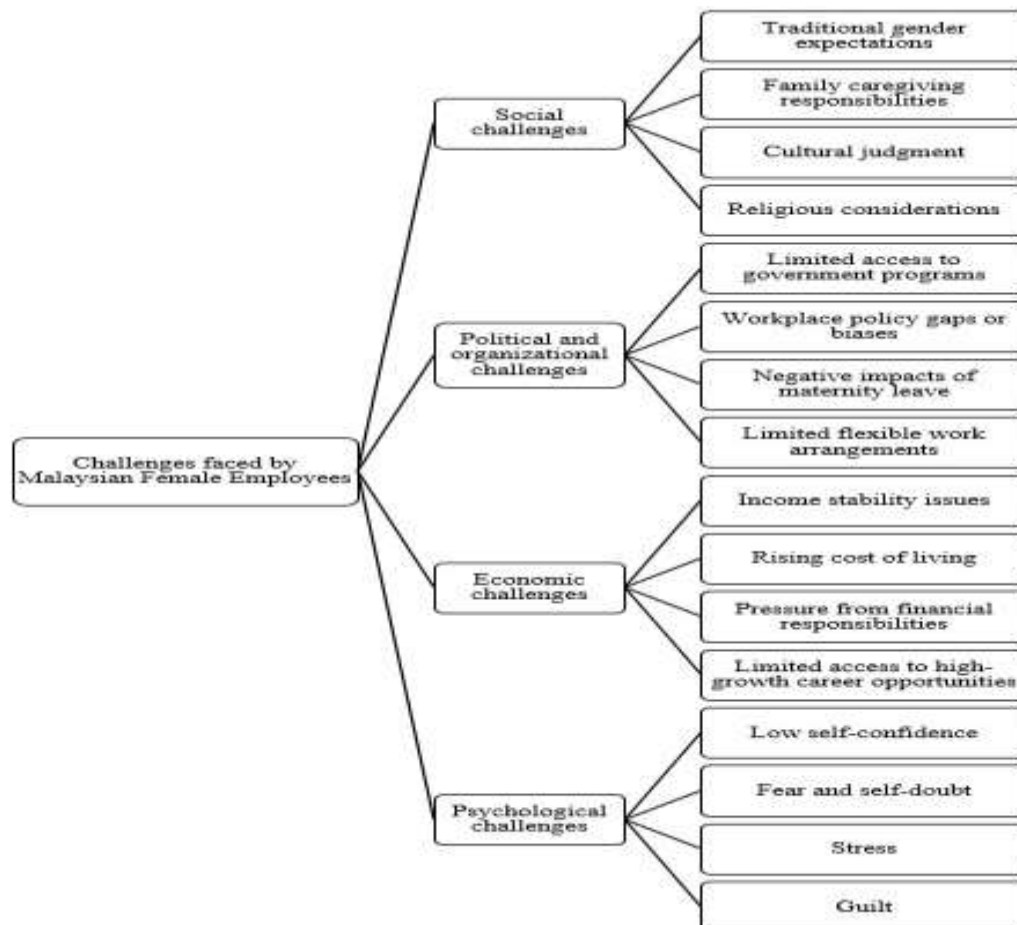
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 1 Challenges faced by Malaysian Female Employees

Figure 1 shows the overall findings of this study. The findings identify four critical challenges faced by the informants: social, political and organizational, economic, and psychological. Social challenges include traditional gender expectations, family caregiving responsibilities, cultural judgment, and religious considerations. On the other hand, political and organizational challenges include limited access to government programs, workplace policy gaps or biases, the negative impacts of maternity leave, and limited flexible work arrangements. Further, economic challenges include economic stability issues, rising cost of living, pressure from financial responsibilities, and limited access to high-growth career opportunities. Lastly, psychological challenges include problems such as low self-confidence, fear and self-doubt, stress, and guilt.

Social Challenges

The findings show that traditional gender expectations, family caregiving responsibilities, cultural judgment, and religious considerations are among the social challenges the informants face. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

1) Traditional gender expectations: Traditional gender expectations that women should prioritize family over career were commonly reported by informants. These societal norms create pressure for them to take on roles that are more 'family-friendly' or stable, and limit their willingness to pursue positions that require high levels of responsibility, long working hours, or travel. As a result, they would limit themselves to specific types of jobs that offer flexibility and stability with fixed hours, such as office-based roles like secretarial, administrative, and teaching positions, so they can balance career growth with responsibility at home and maintain a manageable work-life balance. This has affected their career trajectories and limited their opportunities to advance to higher positions within the company, due to boundaries around what is considered appropriate work for their gender. Informant 1 reflected on her personal experience, highlighting how it influenced her career choices:

"I hesitated to take opportunities involving overtime or travelling because women are expected to focus more on family than career."

Another informant, who is informant 4, described the influence of traditional gender expectations on women's career paths:

"Well, in my community, women are often expected to prioritize family responsibilities over career growth, so basically, the work that is often encouraged for women is work that is seen as stable or family-friendly. For example, the teaching field itself is considered to be suitable for women."

Informant 5 provided another perspective, demonstrating the practical impact of these expectations on her work choices:

"Since I am a woman, my choice of work is limited to office work only, and if possible, I will try my best not to work outstation jobs as it is easier for me to manage my time with my family."

These statements show the internal conflict many women experience when balancing professional ambitions with socially prescribed family roles. The pressure to conform to cultural expectations can lead to hesitation, self-regulation, and avoidance of opportunities perceived as incompatible with family responsibilities, even when they are highly suitable for those roles and when managers, colleagues, and friends motivate them to pursue career advancement. This aligns with Othman et al.'s (2023) and Broadbridge and Simpson's (2011) studies, which show that women leaders in Malaysia frequently encounter gendered assumptions that undermine their authority and competence. The findings reveal how women actively adjust their career aspirations to align with social expectations, even if they are capable of taking on more demanding roles. Hence, this demonstrates how external expectations can shape one's internal decision-making processes and limit exploration of high-growth or non-traditional sectors.

2) Family caregiving responsibilities: Cultural and societal norms have long positioned women as the primary caregivers within the family since older generations. This has remarkably shaped their work-life balance and affects their professional career decisions and development. Furthermore, women are frequently responsible for providing emotional support, managing household work, caring for the health and well-being of aging parents,

and actively participating in their children's education. These heavy daily duties are rarely confined to predictable schedules and require flexibility and a time commitment, which can limit women's opportunities for professional development and promotions. It is because women must weigh their personal ambitions against societal approval and familial obligations, resulting in delayed career progression and shaping choices such as job types, work intensity, and long-term professional goals. One of the informants, who is Informant 2, described her experience of being the primary caregiver of her mother as follows:

"I have to take my mother for check-ups almost every month. After work, I still have administration tasks to do. So my evenings are either paperwork or looking after my mother. Not much personal time."

Informant 5, a Muslim, gave another perspective, highlighting the impact of societal expectations on her professional   choices:

"I used to quit my job because I wanted to raise my children. I did not want society to look at me as someone who cannot raise her own children. This was also an issue as I wanted to fulfill my duty as a mother, and as my in-laws expected me to."

Similarly, Informant 1 emphasized the familial obligations and the challenges she faces in managing professional responsibilities:

"I usually go home every weekend to check on my parents. It is tiring, especially when work deadlines coincide. It is meaningful for me to be there for my family, but it can be hard to take a rest or handle personal things."

The caregiving duties not only consume amounts of personal time but also restrict opportunities for professional growth. These responsibilities can disrupt work schedules and limit the ability to accept career opportunities that require flexibility. The informants demonstrated how they make huge career sacrifices to align with cultural ideas of motherhood. The decision to leave employment was not only based on personal preference. However, it was also heavily influenced by external social pressures, such as the fear of judgment from family and society, demonstrating that societal norms can create invisible constraints on women's career paths. Furthermore, the need to fulfil family obligations every week reduces opportunities for rest, personal time, and recovery from work-related stress. This exhaustion may limit one's ability to engage in professional networking and activities, proving that family responsibilities can blur the boundaries between personal and professional life. These findings align with the ones observed by Aazami et al. (2015), which show that work–family conflict among Malaysian working women is closely linked to poorer psychological well-being and greater emotional exhaustion. Similarly, Noor (2004) discussed Malaysian women who experienced high levels of family interference with work reported lower job satisfaction and higher stress levels because they are tired physically and emotionally.

3) Cultural judgment: Cultural judgment toward women's career choices is a vital social challenge that affects women's confidence, motivation, and willingness to pursue ambitious professional paths. Women often encounter stereotypes, dismissive attitudes, and undervaluation of their work, especially those who worked in the field when their career choices did not align with traditional gender norms. These judgments usually come from close social circles, such as their family members, relatives, and society, making them very hard to ignore and potentially creating lasting psychological and professional effects. When they are continuously exposed to such societal attitudes that assume women's careers are secondary and less important than their family responsibilities, it can create internal doubts about their professional aspirations. Informant 2 shared her experience working in early childhood education, stating that her career choice was frequently questioned by her relatives as follows:

"Some people used to look down on early childhood work. They thought it was easy or not a 'serious' job. When I was studying, some relatives even asked why I needed a diploma for this. Those comments made me feel a bit insecure at the beginning."

Such judgment has reflected a broader societal tendency to underestimate professions that are traditionally feminized, because people tend to view them as an extension of domestic roles rather than skilled and professional occupations, although these careers, dominated by women, often require qualifications, formal

training, responsibility, and expertise. Thus, the lack of societal recognition can lead women to doubt their worth, even if they are fully qualified and capable of handling professional tasks. Similarly, Informant 3 highlighted how cultural judgment questions women's ambition. She said:

"I think one challenge I faced was people. I mean, society questions why women want a highly ambitious career. People always say that even if a woman wants a high-ambitious career, she will be in the kitchen."

This statement reflects rooted gender stereotypes that position women's primary role as homemakers who should always be helping in the kitchen, regardless of their education, skills, or professional achievements. This will significantly influence women's career aspirations and reinforce the idea that women's professional development is unnecessary and temporary, especially for those aiming for high-responsibility or leadership roles in their workplaces. This aligns with Othman et al.'s (2023) and Adisa et al.'s (2024) studies, which indicate that women experience heightened scrutiny and social resistance, framed as selfish or inappropriate, when occupying male-dominated roles or simply for having career ambition. As a result, women would feel discouraged to pursue career advancement because they fear being judged as neglecting their expected roles as women.

4) Religious considerations: Religious considerations are one of the important factors influencing the informants to choose their workplace environments and make career-related decisions. Maintaining religious values is an integral framework that guides behavior, choices, and priorities in the workplace. Their religious beliefs shaped personal routines, such as daily prayers, and broader professional practices, including participation in work-related events, professional networking activities, and career-advancement decisions. However, conflicts often arose when organizational expectations or workplace norms clashed with religious values, requiring them to balance professional expectations and personal faith carefully. Informant 1, a Buddhist, highlighted how some of the work-related social activities conflicted with her religious teachings, as follows:

"My religion teaches discipline and modesty, which are good, but sometimes company events like gatherings in pubs or mixed-gender trips make me uncomfortable. I would politely decline, and although my colleagues understood, I still worried it might affect my networking."

Similarly, Informant 3, a Muslim, emphasized the challenges of fulfilling religious obligations within a demanding work schedule as she narrated the following:

"Sometimes, a busy work schedule makes it difficult to observe prayers on time. It is a good thing if the employers have a surau (prayer room) for the Muslim employees."

Moreover, another Muslim informant (Informant 4) also demonstrated how religious considerations influence long-term career and educational decisions, narrated as follows:

"My religious beliefs affect me. For example, if I were to pursue my studies overseas, I would be thinking whether it would accommodate me as a Muslim or not."

These experiences illustrate that religious boundaries can unintentionally limit informants' access to career opportunities, forcing them to choose between a professional path and their personal faith. Additionally, rigid working hours and workload pressures can create religious challenges, reflecting a broader issue of limited workplace flexibility, in which insufficient time and accommodations for religious needs may cause stress, guilt, and discomfort among employees who want to practice their faith daily, potentially affecting overall job satisfaction. Hence, they carefully evaluate opportunities to ensure they align with their faith, even when those opportunities could advance their careers or academic development. This aligns with Othman et al.'s (2023) research, which shows that religion can provide personal strength. However, some interpretations may reinforce traditional gender roles that influence perceptions of women's leadership and career development. Similarly, Tariq and Syed (2017) further found that Muslim women professionals frequently navigate tensions between their career ambitions and religious obligations, particularly in mixed-gender or socially demanding workplaces. These tensions often limit their ability to fully engage in networking opportunities, leadership roles, and international postings.

Political and Organizational Challenges

The findings reveal that limited access to government programs, workplace policy gaps or biases, the negative

impacts of maternity leave, and limited flexible work arrangements are among the political and organizational challenges faced by the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

1) Limited access to government programs: The findings reveal that the informants had limited access to government programs, which can affect their career development and their ability to compete equally in the workplace. The programs, designed to support skill development and enhance career opportunities, were inaccessible and insufficiently tailored to the needs of women, especially those seeking to balance professional responsibilities and family obligations. As a result, the restricted access to these programs can cause women to miss opportunities for career growth, skill enhancement, financial support, and networking. Informant 1 highlighted the impact of funding limitations on career opportunities as she narrated the following:

"When I first tried to enter my field, there were government funding cuts to training programs. As a result, internships and apprenticeships were very limited. I had the skills, but I could not find a proper pathway to get certified. I ended up having to learn through other channels and rely on networking. It was frustrating, but it made me realize how much policy decisions can impact career opportunities."

This reflects how budgetary constraints at the governmental level can limit access to experimental learning opportunities that help gain hands-on practical skills and build professional networks. Such limitations can affect women who are already negotiating time constraints due to familial obligations, because they further constrain their ability to join these programs for career advancement, especially those who may also be managing caregiving responsibilities alongside their work.

Informant 3 emphasized the issue of awareness, stating that many government programs are "not well-publicized" and that employees are uncertain about the opportunities available to them as follows:

"Some government programs have difficult access. Most people are unaware of these programs because they are not well-publicized. Because they are not well-publicized, I do not have any idea about them."

Additionally, informant 4 provided another perspective about the government support, narrated as follows:

"I would say that it is not intended for women, but it is given to all, and I had once received the government incentive for my work."

For the informants, this lack of information can lead them to miss out on initiatives and opportunities that could support their professional development, making it more difficult to compete with others who have better access to and knowledge of these opportunities. Furthermore, the policies that are equal in distribution may also fail to address specific challenges faced by women, such as balancing career development with caregiving responsibilities, overcoming social and cultural barriers, and facing gendered workplace expectations, because without targeted support to female employees, they may find it harder to fully benefit from government programs. This finding aligns with Aazami et al.'s (2015) study, which emphasizes that insufficient organizational support intensifies stress and psychological strain among Malaysian women, and with Allen et al. (2012), who demonstrate that perceived organizational support strongly predicts work-family balance and overall employee well-being. Consequently, the lack of adequate institutional backing can lead to burnout, diminished productivity, and reduced opportunities for career advancement for women.

2) Workplace policy gaps or biases: Workplace policy gaps and implicit gender bias pose vital challenges for the informants, as formal policies alone are insufficient to ensure genuine workplace equality. In recent years, many organizations have introduced gender quality frameworks and policies, but these measures are often undermined by weak enforcement, and unconscious bias continues to disadvantage women. As a result, female employees may continue to experience limited recognition, unequal treatment, and restricted access to advancement opportunities, even when supposedly fair policies are in place, forcing them to work harder to prove their competence. Informant 1 highlighted the unintended consequences of gender balance policies, narrated as follows:

"My company once introduced a gender balance policy to increase the number of women in management. The intention was good, but at first it created some tension. Some colleagues assumed promotions were based on

gender instead of merit. That experience taught me that policy alone is not enough. People also need awareness and mindset changes."

Although such policies are designed to promote equality, this perception can create additional psychological pressure on female employees, who must continually prove their success to be considered deserving. Informant 5 also shared a more direct experience of gender bias, as follows:

"In order to be promoted, we were required to do assessments, and my result was better than that of other male candidates, but I was not selected because the company preferred men."

This experience clearly reveals a gap between formal promotion criteria, such as self-assessments, and the actual decision-making process. Although female employees sometimes perform better, informal bias or gendered expectations can influence the outcome of promotions, leading to women being overlooked and limiting their upward mobility, and reinforcing the belief that men are always more suitable for leadership roles than women. Such experiences can be deeply demotivating and disappointing due to the injustice in their career progression. Informant 4 further emphasized the bias, narrating the following:

"Well, there were situations where gender related issues were fuddled and not easily captured by the former policies. For example, even though the company promotes equal opportunities and all, there is still some informal gender bias when it comes to decision making, and also the assumption that women are less available for certain projects."

These assumptions are commonly linked to stereotypes that women are less available or committed because they have greater family and caregiving responsibilities, resulting in female employees often being excluded from high-impact projects or leadership roles in their company. However, these gender biases are not openly stated, so they are harder to address or report through official complaint channels, allowing them to persist within organizational cultures. This aligns with research by Nur Azam and Arumugam (2023), indicating that organizational culture and implicit bias are key barriers to women's career advancement in Malaysia.

3) Negative impacts of maternity leave: The findings further reveal a gap between policy intentions and real-life workplace experiences regarding the impact of maternity leave. Although maternity leave policies are designed to protect women's rights and health, support childbearing and promote work-life balance, several negative experiences shared by the informants indicate that taking maternity leave can lead to professional setbacks, increased pressure when returning to work, and feelings of exclusion after returning, which can unintentionally disadvantage them in advancement opportunities. Maternity leave is often treated as a description that leads to long-term professional consequences, rather than as a regular and temporary phase in a woman's career. This clearly highlights that the workplace structures are not fully prepared to support female employees before, during, and after their maternity leave, which is very unfair for them. Informant 1 observed the experiences of employees who return from maternity leave, narrated as follows:

"The company offers good maternity leave, but people who took it often came back to fewer opportunities. They were sometimes left out of high-profile projects. It made me realize that a policy can look good on paper, but workplace attitudes still need to change for it to be truly fair."

Similarly, Informant 5 expressed a personal sense of falling behind professionally after her maternity leave, narrated as follows:

"My companies so far all provide maternity leave, but after the leave, I will feel lagging due to the long-time of not working, and things will be all new and updated."

These experiences show that the informants who have taken maternity leave are perceived as less committed and less capable of handling demanding tasks, even after they resume their roles. Furthermore, the sense of falling behind highlights the challenges women face, including a loss of confidence and the need to readjust to a fast-paced work environment, especially as projects and technologies change rapidly nowadays. Additionally, informant 3 highlighted another dimension of the issue, in which the extra workload of the female employee who took maternity leave has been placed on other colleagues who cover their duties and responsibilities.

"As a worker who has had to cover the task of someone on maternity leave, it can be quite heavy because I already have my own workload. So, taking on additional responsibility without extra pay or allowance can be exhausting."

This can reflect good teamwork and shared responsibility in the workplace, but it can also contribute to negative attitudes toward employees on maternity leave when colleagues have a heavier workload. Such attitudes may influence how returning mothers are treated, including being excluded from primary responsibilities, and they would feel stressed and depressed. Overall, without clear policies that ensure equal access to opportunities after returning from maternity leave, the informants may experience limited career growth and ongoing pressure to prove their commitment. This is aligned with research by Correl et al. (2007), which shows that women experience slower wage growth and reduced leadership opportunities after childbirth.

4) Limited flexible work arrangements: Another important challenge the informants face, especially those balancing professional responsibilities with family and personal commitments, is the limited availability of flexible work arrangements. For the informants who manage multiple roles, it is essential to support them by offering flexible work options such as hybrid schedules, remote work, and part-time arrangements. However, their experience suggests that such arrangements are insufficiently available and inconsistent across many workplaces. The lack of flexibility creates additional pressure and reduces career progression opportunities for female employees who are responsible for both caregiving and household responsibilities. Informant 1 emphasized the importance of flexibility, narrated as follows:

"I believe flexible options would help a lot, especially for women with family responsibilities like me."

On the other hand, informant 4 shared a positive experience with hybrid work arrangements, as follows:

"Yes, I think for a while I worked in a hybrid environment where I could work from home or go to my work station. I think, in a way, it improves my work-life balance. So, I have saved time commuting because my school is quite far from where I live, and I have more control over my schedule and how I manage my personal responsibilities."

This experience highlights how rigid work structures can limit female employees' ability to effectively manage both work and family roles, as without flexibility, they may be forced to choose between fulfilling professional expectations and meeting family needs. This aligns with research by Wijayanuddin and Zulkifly (2021), which found that inflexible workloads significantly contributed to burnout among Malaysian female teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, flexible arrangements can enhance productivity and job satisfaction, demonstrating that accommodating work schedules does not reduce professional performance but enables employees to balance work and home responsibilities. Informant 3 further expressed a perspective, emphasizing the need for more employers to implement hybrid or flexible work policies in the future, as follows:

"So far, my company does not offer any options for hybrid working hours, so I do not have any comment on this. However, I really hope more employers will implement hybrid arrangements in the future."

The informant suggested that such arrangements are increasingly seen as essential because modern workplaces must adapt to employees' diverse needs. This highlights that adopting flexible work practices can support gender equity, retain skilled talent, and create a more sustainable and supportive work environment.

Economic Challenges

The findings reveal that economic stability issues, rising cost of living, pressure from financial responsibilities, and limited access to high-growth career opportunities are among the economic challenges the informants face. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

1) Income stability issues: Income stability was consistently identified as a key factor influencing the informants' career decisions. They preferred to remain in familiar, stable jobs that provided consistent income rather than actively seek higher-paying positions. The important thing is that the current salary is sufficient to cover daily expenses and more. This was especially evident among those who had financial responsibilities toward their families, such as supporting parents or contributing to household expenses. As a result, they often

chose to remain in familiar, secure jobs rather than risk career changes that might offer growth but provide less immediate financial certainty. Informant 2, who works in early childhood education and supports her elderly mother, explained that although her burden has increased, she has no intention of changing jobs. She said:

"Even though my monthly expenses are higher now, I will not think about changing jobs. Starting somewhere new means starting from zero again, and at my age, as long as the salary is enough, stability is more important."

This reflects how the informants' career decisions are shaped not solely by personal ambition but by financial responsibilities and perceived risk. Similarly, Informant 1 highlighted that income uncertainty discourages her from pursuing career advancement:

"If the income is not guaranteed, it is very hard to take that risk, especially when I already have commitments."

These experiences align with research showing that women are more likely than men to prioritize job security due to economic vulnerability and family obligations (Aazami et al., 2015; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). The findings suggest that income considerations constrain carer mobility, particularly for women in caregiving roles, reinforcing long-term employment in stable but lower-growth occupations.

2) Rising cost of living: The rising cost of living in Malaysia intensifies economic pressures on the informants. They reported that rising costs for healthcare, housing, transportation, and daily necessities limit their ability to take career risks, pursue further education, or transition into new sectors. Informant 1, who is from the low-income category, described how the pressures of rising living costs limited her career choices and forced her to give up her dreams:

"The rising cost of living definitely affected my career choices. When I first started working, I wanted to enter the arts field, but the salary was too low, especially with increasing rent and transportation costs. So, I switched to a more stable industry with better pay. It was not my dream field, but it gave me the financial stability I needed. It made me realize that sometimes you have to balance passion with practicality."

Similarly, another informant from the low-income category (Informant 3) highlighted how economic uncertainty narrows career choices. She shared:

"Higher living costs push me to prioritize job stability and good benefits. So, it also makes me more careful and selective when considering a new career change."

These findings reflect broader national and global trends in which rising living costs disproportionately affect women, particularly those in lower- and middle-income groups. Economic stress has been shown to increase work-family conflict and psychological strain, further limiting women's career flexibility (Diener et al., 2018; Noor, 2004). Consequently, women often remain in familiar jobs that provide consistent income, even when better opportunities may exist elsewhere.

3) Pressure from financial responsibilities: The findings also reveal that family financial responsibilities emerged as a crucial challenge related to the informants' career trajectories. They consistently reported feeling obligated to contribute financially to their households, which influenced their willingness to change jobs or pursue career advancement. Informant 4 explained:

"To be fair, I offer some support to my family financially, so this influences the type of job that I pursue, so I would try to look for a position with predictable incomes and strong benefits, even if they did not fully match my expectations. So the responsibilities limited my ability to explore more career opportunities."

Informant 1 similarly described the pressure to remain continuously employed:

"After graduating, I needed to support my family financially. Because of that, I chose a stable job instead of pursuing my creative interests. It was not my ideal path, but it taught me responsibility and financial discipline. When things improved later, I slowly started reconnecting with what I originally wanted to do."

The findings indicate that financial responsibilities play a decisive role in shaping the informants' career path

decisions, leading them to prioritize income stability over personal interests, risk-taking, and long-term career exploration. As illustrated by Informant 4, the obligation to provide financial support to family led her to seek positions with predictable income and substantial employment benefits, even when these roles did not fully align with her personal aspirations. This reflects a typical pattern among women who adopt risk-averse career strategies to meet economic obligations, often limiting their entry into emerging or higher-growth sectors (Aazami et al., 2015; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Such decisions demonstrate how financial responsibility constrains occupational mobility and reinforces employment continuity in stable but less fulfilling roles.

Similarly, Informant 1's experience highlights how early financial obligations after graduation influenced her decision to prioritize job stability over pursuing her interests. This decision reflects economic pragmatism, in which women delay or abandon personal career ambitions to meet immediate family needs. While this choice can cultivate financial discipline and resilience, as the informant acknowledged, it may also lead to delayed career satisfaction, slower professional growth, and long-term opportunity costs (Broadbridge & Simpson, 2011).

The effects of these financially driven decisions extend beyond individual careers and contribute to broader structural inequalities in the labour market. When women consistently select stable, lower-risk employment due to family obligations, they become overrepresented in traditionally feminized sectors that offer limited advancement and lower wage growth (Poon & Leeves, 2022). Over time, this reinforces gender wage gaps and occupational segregation, making it more difficult for women to achieve economic independence and leadership positions. Moreover, the internalization of financial responsibility as a primary obligation can reduce women's willingness to reskill, transition to new jobs, or pursue entrepreneurial ventures, further narrowing their career trajectories (Nur Azam & Arumugam, 2023).

Overall, these findings suggest that financial responsibilities influence the informants' career decisions by shaping risk perceptions, limiting career mobility, and delaying personal aspirations. While these decisions often reflect responsibility and resilience, they also have long-term effects, including constrained career progression, reduced job satisfaction, and persistent gender inequalities in employment outcomes.

4) Limited access to high-growth career opportunities: Limited access to high-growth, high-value sectors emerged as another vital economic challenge, influencing the informants' career development. While some actively sought to enter growing industries, others perceived such transitions as risky, unattainable, or constrained by educational qualifications, skills, and established career paths. These findings indicate that access to high-growth opportunities is shaped not only by individual motivation but also by structural and educational barriers that disproportionately affect women.

Informant 1 described her strong interest in entering the technology sector, citing its rapid growth and higher earning potential. Despite proactively taking online courses and attending professional meetups, she encountered intense competition and entry barriers based on experience. She shared as follows:

"I was interested in entering the technology sector because it is growing fast. However, the competition was tough, and many jobs required experience I did not have."

In contrast, Informant 2 expressed strong reluctance to pursue opportunities outside her current field of early childhood education, citing the perceived risks and irreversibility of a career change. She said:

"I have never tried to enter other sectors. Changing fields now feels impossible and risky."

Overall, the findings reveal that limited access to high-growth opportunities among Malaysian female employees is shaped by a combination of skill requirements, educational credentials, financial risk, and accumulated career paths. While some women actively pursue reskilling and education to overcome these barriers, others remain constrained by economic responsibilities and perceived career risks. These patterns contribute to occupational segmentation, slower wage growth, and reduced long-term economic empowerment for women (Schafgans, 2000; Poon & Leeves, 2022).

Psychological Challenges

The findings reveal that low self-confidence, fear and self-doubt, stress, and guilt are among the psychological

challenges faced by the informants. The following paragraphs will discuss those issues in detail.

1) Low self-confidence: The findings reveal that low self-confidence is a critical challenge and strongly influences informants' ability to make independent career decisions, assert professional authority, and pursue career advancement opportunities. Self-confidence shapes how individuals perceive their competence, value, and legitimacy within professional environments. Those with lower self-confidence may internalize doubts about their abilities, become overly cautious in decision-making, and rely heavily on validation from supervisors or colleagues. This dependency can restrict autonomy and limit proactive career behaviour, particularly during early career stages when professional identity is still forming.

Repeated exposure to limited recognition, subtle gender bias, perceived skill inadequacies, or heightened scrutiny in male-dominated or competitive workplaces can gradually erode women's confidence. Over time, these experiences may reinforce self-limiting beliefs, leading them to underestimate their capabilities and avoid positions that require visibility, leadership, or assertiveness (Othman et al., 2023). As a result, they may prioritize job security, familiarity, and stability over challenging roles that could support long-term career growth. This cautious career orientation does not reflect a lack of competence, but rather a protective response shaped by psychological vulnerability and workplace dynamics.

Informant 1 reflected on her early career experience, explaining how low self-confidence influenced her decision-making process:

"Earlier in my career, I was not very confident. I always looked for my supervisor's approval before making decisions."

This reliance on external approval highlights how low self-confidence can limit women's sense of professional authority and self-trust. Such behavior may reduce opportunities for leadership development, as decision-making independence is often interpreted as a marker of competence and readiness for advancement. However, Informant 1's experience also illustrates that self-confidence is not static and can be developed over time through meaningful experiences and achievements.

Her confidence improved after she independently pursued professional development:

"When I decided to pursue a certification on my own and completed it successfully, it showed me that I can trust myself."

This experience demonstrates how mastery, skill acquisition, and self-directed learning can strengthen self-efficacy and reshape self-perception. Completing the certification provided tangible evidence of her competence, allowing her to overcome internal doubts and build greater confidence in her abilities. These findings align with Othman et al.'s (2023) study, which noted that confidence among Malaysian women leaders often develops progressively through accumulated experience, self-achievement, and external recognition, rather than being immediately present at the start of one's career.

2) Fear and self-doubt: Fear of failure and persistent self-doubt emerged as vital psychological challenges that affected informants' willingness to take career-related risks. Career risk-taking may involve applying for competitive positions, pursuing leadership roles, transitioning into unfamiliar fields, or accepting greater responsibility. However, when women perceive that mistakes may be judged more harshly or that failure could confirm negative stereotypes, fear becomes a powerful deterrent to ambition (Poon & Leeves, 2022).

In workplace environments where the informants feel highly visible or scrutinised, fear of making errors or being perceived as incompetent can intensify. This psychological pressure may encourage them to adopt conservative career strategies, such as remaining in familiar roles or delaying career progression, even when they possess the necessary skills and qualifications. Over time, fear-driven avoidance can limit career mobility and reinforce occupational segregation. In relation to this, Informant 1 described how fear previously constrained her aspirations:

"Fear of failure used to stop me from trying new things. I hesitated to apply for a competitive fellowship because I thought I would get rejected."

Although she did not obtain the fellowship, the experience challenged her assumptions about failure and rejection, allowing her to reinterpret failure as part of learning and growth. Further, Informant 3 described a more persistent struggle with fear and self-doubt:

"Fear of making mistakes sometimes stops me from taking opportunities because I tend to be overly cautious, especially in unfamiliar situations."

These experiences illustrate how fear and self-doubt operate as internalized psychological constraints that restrict women's career exploration and advancement. Consistent with Poon and Leeves' (2022) study, gender-based discrimination, unequal evaluation standards, and limited representation in senior roles may reinforce these fears, encouraging women to adopt risk-averse decision-making strategies that slow career progression and reduce long-term professional fulfilment.

3) Stress: Stress was identified as one of the influential psychological challenges affecting informants' career decisions, performance, and long-term workforce sustainability. They described experiencing stress while balancing professional responsibilities with family obligations. These stressors are often cumulative and persistent, rather than temporary, leading to chronic psychological strain. Informant 2 explained how stress affected her daily functioning:

"When I am stressed because of being tired or overwhelmed, I cannot focus well. Small problems feel bigger."

The statement highlights how psychological strain can magnify minor workplace issues, reducing emotional resilience and problem-solving capacity. Informant 4 further described how stress influenced her career decisions:

"When I am stressed and overwhelmed, the thought of taking on more responsibility feels intimidating."

These experiences demonstrate how prolonged stress can discourage women from pursuing advancement opportunities, even when they are capable and qualified. Such findings are consistent with Aazami et al. (2015), who found that sustained stress and unresolved work–family conflict negatively affect both psychological well-being and career sustainability among Malaysian women, often leading to stalled career progression or voluntary withdrawal from leadership pathways. In addition, research consistently shows that work–family conflict is a major contributor to psychological distress among Malaysian working women, increasing the risk of burnout, emotional fatigue, and reduced job satisfaction (Wijayanuddin & Zulkifly, 2021). When emotional resources are depleted, women may struggle to engage fully at work, manage complex tasks, or cope with unexpected challenges.

4) Guilt: The findings further reveal that the informants felt guilty due to the societal expectations that expect them to excel simultaneously in professional, familial, and emotional roles. They are often expected to remain composed, nurturing, and emotionally stable, regardless of internal stress or external challenges. These expectations can lead to internalized guilt, emotional exhaustion, and self-blame, particularly when career advancement is perceived to conflict with family responsibilities (Othman et al., 2023).

Such pressures are reinforced through cultural norms, organizational expectations, and informal workplace dynamics, making them difficult to challenge. Emotional labor by managing emotions to meet social and professional expectations will become an invisible burden that they must carry, often without institutional recognition or support. This is reflected in the narratives of Informant 1, who described such feelings that she faced:

"Choosing the career opportunity made me feel guilty."

These findings support Othman et al.'s (2023) argument that societal expectations remain deeply embedded in organisational and cultural structures, creating persistent psychological pressure that shapes women's emotional well-being, self-evaluation, and career decisions.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the multifaceted challenges faced by Malaysian female employees by examining their lived

experiences across social, political, organizational, economic, and psychological dimensions. The findings reveal that Malaysian women face a complex and interconnected set of challenges that collectively hinder their career development and advancement. Four critical dimensions emerge: social challenges rooted in traditional gender roles, family caregiving duties, cultural judgment, and religious expectations; political and organizational barriers stemming from inadequate government support, workplace policy gaps, maternity leave penalties, and limited flexible arrangements; economic constraints including financial instability, rising living costs, heavy financial responsibilities, and restricted access to high-growth sectors; and psychological burdens such as low self-confidence, fear, self-doubt, stress, and guilt. These findings underscore the need for holistic interventions that address not only individual-level psychological support but also systemic changes in organizational policies, economic opportunities, and sociocultural norms to enable women to achieve greater career equity and long-term professional success.

RECOMMENDATION

To address the multifaceted challenges identified in this study, policymakers, employers, and community stakeholders should collaborate to implement targeted, systemic interventions. At the organizational level, employers are strongly encouraged to adopt and expand flexible work arrangements, such as remote work options, part-time roles, and compressed workweeks, while ensuring these policies are equally accessible to both men and women to reduce the career penalties associated with caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, organizations should conduct regular unconscious bias training, review recruitment and promotion practices to eliminate gender-based barriers, and introduce family-friendly policies that mitigate the negative impacts of maternity leave, such as guaranteed re-entry at the same level and performance-based career progression. At the governmental level, Malaysia should strengthen existing initiatives by increasing funding and awareness of programs that support women's re-entry into the workforce, providing subsidized childcare, and offering targeted skills development and retraining opportunities, particularly in high-growth sectors like technology and finance, to overcome structural barriers to career mobility.

On the socio-cultural front, public campaigns and educational programs are essential for challenging traditional gender norms and promoting shared caregiving responsibilities within families. Religious and community leaders can play a pivotal role in fostering inclusive narratives that recognize women's professional contributions without stigmatizing their family roles. Finally, integrating psychological support into workplace wellness programs such as mentoring schemes, peer support networks, and access to counseling can help women build self-confidence, manage stress, and overcome internalized guilt and self-doubt. By addressing these interconnected social, political, organizational, economic, and psychological challenges through coordinated action, Malaysia can create a more equitable labor market that enables women to achieve sustainable career advancement, improved work-life balance, and greater overall well-being.

LIMITATION

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a small sample of five female informants, limiting the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative approach allowed for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, the results cannot be assumed to represent all Malaysian female employees across different industries, regions, or socio-economic backgrounds.

Further, the study focused exclusively on female employees, without including male perspectives or organizational decision-makers. As a result, the findings reflect women's subjective experiences but do not capture comparative gender dynamics or employer viewpoints that may further contextualize workplace practices and policies. In addition, most informants were employed in the private sector, with only one participant from the public sector. This imbalance may limit the ability to thoroughly compare challenges across different employment sectors, particularly given that organizational cultures and policy implementation may vary between public and private institutions.

Additionally, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing participants' experiences at a single point in time. Women's challenges, priorities, and coping strategies may evolve across different life stages, such as marriage, childbirth, or career transitions. Longitudinal research would provide deeper insights into how these challenges change over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insights into the complex

challenges faced by Malaysian female employees and offers a foundation for future research to expand on these findings using larger samples, mixed methods, or comparative approaches.

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