Assessing The Key Contributory Factors For Women To Become Managers In Organisations

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Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper takes a deep insight into the factors having contributed for the success of women to become managers. There is a need to understand the facts about the career progress for those successful women reaching their respective positions. There are several elements such as education, perseverance, spousal support, management support and other factors which have contributed for the career advancement of women in organisations.

**Design/methodology/approach:** For this study, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 10 women managers from different organisations. They were both from public and private sectors in Mauritius.

**Findings:** The research identifies the main factors which contributed towards the achievement of women to become managers. From the data collection, the participants described different elements for their career success, such as educational qualifications, family support, personality traits, working experience and organisational support. Their responses were also validated from the literature.

**Research limitations/implications:** Future research is needed to examine the contributory factors for women’s career advancement. As this research work cannot be generalised to all women managers, extensive in-depth studies by using different medium on the theme could give better results.

**Practical implications:** Top level management should take cognizance of the difficulties women face during their career. An equal gender policy should be applied at management level.

**Originality/Value:** The paper contributes to the literature with regards to the evolution of Mauritian women managers in organisations and identifies the key elements having contributed for their current success.

**Keywords:** Contributory factors, Career, Managers, Organisations.

**Introduction**
Over the last few decades, there has been a numerous increase of highly skilled women professionals and managers across different organizations. Since 1960s, women have increasingly offered employment into the job market (Saadin; Ramli; Johari; Harin, 2015). As women account almost half of the total population worldwide, they are not equally represented as their male counterparts at the managerial level and are still far away from the equal opportunities necessary to gain access to high responsibility positions (Moreno-Romero; Carrasco-Gallego, 2012). Women managers are generally concentrated in lower management positions.

However, the presence of women in managerial positions is visible compared to women as housewives of the 1960s (Schwanke, 2013). The literature review reveals that personal traits, corporate networking and management support have an impact on women’s career. Hence, these factors cannot be considered in isolation as they, in turn, affect one another (Fagenson, 1990).
Literature Review

According Rosen et al. (1989), women managers have to face greater stresses and career obstacles because of different stereotypes embedded within the corporate culture, for example, poor managerial skills, paternalistic cultures, inequality in pay, sexual harassment, and other factors related to women’s career barriers. The actual position of women in organisations is still concentrated in traditionally ‘female’ functional areas. Although women may place less emphasis on career progression than men, they are striving to be at higher levels, but are unable to reach it (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Concerning gender equality and women’s empowerment, Mauritius has adopted legislative measures to protect and promote women’s rights (Sexual Discrimination Act- 1997, Equal Opportunities Act- 2009, CEDAW-1984, Africa Platform for Action, Beijing- 1995) (Ramgutty-Wong, 2000). During the 1950’s, women were fewer than men in number in Mauritius. However, the female population has been growing at a faster rate whereby there were almost equal numbers of men and women. This balance in the population has been stagnant for some 40 years. As from 1990, women have been increasingly outnumbering men over the years. In 2014, the population comprised 636,932 women compared to 624,002 men. Women outnumbered men by 12,930 as they live on average seven years longer than men. Out of a total population of 1,260,934, there were 636,932 women against 624,002 men, i.e., 98 men for every 100 women (Gender Statistics: Statistics Mauritius, 2014).

Women’s career

Women’s careers in organisations face more obstructions and interruptions, and thus their career paths often differ from those of men (Burke and Mattis, 2005). Apart from working in office, women have additional responsibilities such as childbearing and giving care to their family. Being female is still characterised as a major obstacle to career progression into higher positions in organisations. Senior managerial positions are traditionally held by older-gray hair men, and many women’s careers stagnate at lower and middle management level (Jyrkinen, 2013).

Barriers affecting women's career progression

In the world of work, a lot of organisations are struggling to keep on to their best and brightest women. The presence of barriers such as prejudice and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon make it difficult for women to achieve higher positions (Ismail and Ibrahim, 2008). Women’s participation in the workforce, in the developed countries, has increased over the past twenty years and they have made huge progress in their careers and have become managers. In developing countries, however, women have joined the ranks of managers in limited numbers. Some researchers argue that this increase of women in the labour market is due to decreasing discrimination and gender stereotyping. Others argue that the advancement of women in the workforce in the developing countries is attributed to factors including women’s higher education (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011).

Despite the increasing participation of women in the workforce in the developing countries, women are failing to achieve the same levels of success as men. Some barriers, such as gender discrimination, continue to keep women stagnating at lower management levels within their organisations (Metcalfé, 2006, 2007, 2008; Moghadam, 2004, cited in Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). Women who aspire to reach managerial positions are also blocked by family and work-related issues. According to Adler & al. (1993, cited in Jogulu and Wood, 2011), the managerial careers of women are less successful than men. This shows that women managers face various barriers that hamper them to further progress at higher levels on their place of work.

Factors which help women to reach managerial level

There is a need to understand the facts about the career progress for those successful women, for example, how they have managed to reach their respective positions (Yukongdi, 2009). There are several elements, such as individual, interpersonal, personal characteristics, work-life balance,
management support, which have contributed for the success of women in organisations. Individual factors refer to the sources of power that people brings to a position at the work setting and such factors might include personality traits, family background, work experience, skills, strength and determination, education and appropriate training and development.

Personal characteristics such as patience, integrity, honesty, consensus, perseverance, flexibility and ability to learn are attributes for women’s career progression (Van der Boon, 2003). According to Ng and Pine (2003), there are some attributes which are directly related to career success namely working attitude, communication skills, problem-solving, hard working and job expertise and knowledge. As women’s roles are as the primary caregivers, they are actually earning the majority of bachelors and advanced degrees and they are integrating further into management positions.

**Work-life balance**

Work-life balance is the maintenance of equilibrium between responsibilities at work and at home (Vani, 2014). Human resources are the most valuable and unique assets of any organisation. Today, in this transformational world, women workforce is present in almost every sector of the economy, which was quite invisible some 30 years back. Work-life balance could be considered among one of the important factors in influencing the organisation’s efficiency (Guest, cited in Vani, 2014). The concept of work-life has been absorbed from the job satisfaction level of an employee, which is an extrinsic factor of satisfying needs of an employee and at the same time retaining the productivity levels at the workplace (Greenhaus, 1985).

People prefer to work in organisations that support work-life balance. But men appear to benefit more than women (Burke 2002). Men get more satisfaction when achieving on the job even at the cost of ignoring the family. Consequently, for women, work and family are both equally important and both are the sources of their satisfaction. When work does not allow women to take care of their family, they feel unhappy and frustrated. They want a balance between work and family and they do not like one crossing the other (Burke 2002).

However, work-life balance is to be considered for female workforce as they are now more visible into the public domain. It is to be mentioned that women continue to maintain their primary responsibility, for example, care-giving to children, looking after elderly parents and simultaneously considering their career. Due to these factors, women’s career is being diverged (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005).

The phenomenon of work and family clash can be avoided in a situation where women do not marry and remain childless. Ann and al. (2002, cited in Saadin and al.2016) found that it was very rare for women with children to be in senior positions. Women are stressed due to the multiple roles they have to play in running a career and at the same time running a home and family. According to Indra and al. (2013), they perceived that family responsibilities is one of the main barriers to women career advancement.

**Dual career couple**

Dual career couples refer to couples in which both partners are involved in an upward mobility in their professional trajectory (Hille and Dyehouse, 1987). Clement and Clement (2001) added an additional requirement for being defined a dual career couple of that of having children, that is of having caring responsibilities. According to their concept, dual career couples are defined by the fact that both partners are highly qualified, and follow their career path while not renouncing having children and a satisfying family life.

However, for dual-career couples, scholars have mainly focused on work-life balance because of the dilemma that achieving this balance can present to both individuals and organisations (Barnett,
Researchers have more recently examined the couple as the unit of analysis, acknowledging that a couple operates not as individuals but as a dyad (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Hammer et al., 1997). In dual career couples, both men and women pursue paid employment outside of the home and also share responsibilities within the home (Barnett and Hyde, 2001).

**Spousal support**

Traditionally, an ideal manager is considered to be a man whose work is his life and the wife takes care of his household, even if she is in an active working life. Thus, according to the traditional gender order, a concept to analyze the informal social arrangements that define the complex and changing patterns of gender relations (Connell, 1987 cited in Heikkinen and al., 2014), women are in a situation to provide support for their husbands’ careers rather than for their own careers. This positioned women in an unequal situation in relation to their husbands (Tienati and al., 2002).

However, female managers focusing towards their professional careers can be seen as producing gender relations which is not in line with traditional gender order assumptions. They are now characterized as career-oriented and economically independent from the traditional patriarchal structures (gender order) of income support from the husbands (Gatrell, 2007).

Social support from male spouses for women in the field of career advancement takes a number of different forms. Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008) suggested that spousal support for women managers are where each partner provides each other with practical help in the house as well as with the children (behavioural support) and assistance with personal and family or work-related problems (emotional support).

Women who receive support from their husbands can better manage the work-family conflict and that spousal support can have an effect on employees’ creative performance at work by enhancing their positive mood (Rosenbaum and Cohen, 1999 cited in Heikkinen and al., 2014).

In their study, Heikkinen and al. (2014) summarized the following forms of spousal support for women managers:

- Psychological support: the spouse discusses listens and provides a steady and reliable background of her career.
- Hands-on support: the spouse takes care of the children and household.
- Assistance to career: the spouse contributing to the woman’s work-related activities, providing instrumental support for her work and in his career making choices which are advantageous for the woman’s career.

**Human and Social capital**

Capitals are resources that individuals accumulate and use. Human capital comprises education, professional experience, skills and qualifications. Bourdieu (1986, cited in Field, 2005) is one of the original thinkers behind the debate on social capital. He defined social capital as the sum of resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, cited in Seraj, 2015). How much an individual may influence others to create success can also be viewed as social capital.

Human and social capitals are important for the advancement of women in organisations. Probert (2005) found that one reason for women’s under-representation in Australian universities was that they had “less human capital than men, measured in terms of formal qualifications and work experience”. Social capital such as networking is often proposed as crucial for enhancing career progression and/or a specific strategy to help women break through the glass ceiling.
Organisational Support

There have been many strategic commitments, including equal opportunity legislation, to improve gender balance over the last 30 years through changes to both policy and practice. But there is a lack of women at senior levels which is still visible in organizations (Clarke, 2011). These initiatives have resulted in some minor improvements.

Some researchers argue that developmental programs should be more specific towards women rather than dealing with organisational policies and cultures that hinder women’s career progress (Meyerson and Fletcher, 2000, p. 129). Women need to acquire the “tricks of the trade” in order not to find themselves in isolation compared to their counterparts.

Networking

Networking refers to activities by people in organisations who try to develop and maintain relationships with those with the potential to assist or guide them in their work or career. Interpersonal factors are strong elements in the relationship amongst people within the context of their positions in organisations. Interpersonal elements include mentor support, internal networks.

Increased job opportunities, job performance, income, promotions and career satisfaction, recognition, access to information, career advice, social support, access to resources, collaboration, strategy making, professional support and others in relation to networking can positively have a positive impact on career outcomes (Singh and al, 2006). Informal gatherings such as social activities of women are also an important type of networking which can be developed into more formal networks supported by the employer.

Lack of access to networks in many organisations is seen as barriers for women to reach the top. Therefore, many companies are starting to support corporate networks for women (Catalyst and Opportunity Now (2000), cited in Singh and al, (2006). Networking can improve career mobility through greater access to information, resources and sponsorship (Seibert et al., 2001). Through networks individuals are more visible in organisations whereby work assignments and other duties in relation to their work are given to them and which in return women can achieve promotions, and higher compensation. Through networking with each other, women would be more at ease to share career development experiences and strategies, and learn from one another.

Mentoring

Mentoring involves either formal or informal developmental partnership where employees receive information, advice, and guidance from experienced or senior colleagues, usually within the organization, who has expertise and a strong desire to help others grow in their jobs. Mentoring encompasses coaching, sharing perspectives, and transferring knowledge and wisdom to the mentee(s). The mentor is not necessary a supervisor but a person with whom the employee can communicate freely and honestly without concern about being evaluated (Schooly, 2010).

When a women manager has a mentor, her visibility at the workplace is improved such as entry into the social networks, access to resources, and increased status as a result of being associated with a person of higher status (Levesque et al., cited in Clarke, 2011). Day and Allen (2004) affirm that people who are mentored in organisations report at higher levels of career motivation and career self-efficacy. Mentors also play an important role in helping their mentees in the interpretation of the organisation’s work-family culture including managerial support. Mentors can even increase self-confidence to their mentees and facilitate their career goals (Dreher & Cox, 1996, cited in Dworkin and al., 2012). In a way, networking and mentoring could enhance the advancement for women’s careers to senior management positions (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005).
If top management wants future top managers, training and career paths might be addressed through well structured mentoring programs taking into consideration the organizational goals and the legal implications of its actions. Mentorships are most helpful in three key areas such as career planning, coaching and guidance; protection and career risk management; and increasing aspiration level and providing role model (Dworkin and al., 2012).

Research Methodology

Research can be defined as something that people undertake in order to find out things in a systematic way and which can increase their knowledge (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2005). For this study, the aim is to assess the contributory factors for women to become managers in organisations in Mauritius. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

(i) What are the supporting factors for women to become managers in organisations?

(ii) To what extent do organisations help women to climb the hierarchical ladder?

There is no generally accepted definition of managers (Wooldridge, 2008). Various definitions share common elements of people at the intermediate level of an organization. Managers can be defined as the coordination of an organizational unit's day-to-day activities with the activities of vertically related groups. This level ranges between top management and the first level of supervision (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992).

The researcher defines women managers as people who are positioned from the first line management level and below top management level of the corporate hierarchy, i.e they are the link between top management and front-line managers. They are accountable for the strategic plans laid by top management.

Research design

The research design involved the use of qualitative research methods. Research that depends on rich qualitative data is becoming more popular whereby the outcome might be fresh (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The researcher used qualitative method as it was deemed to be appropriate for this study. An interpretative approach was used to determine the issues and challenges facing women managers in reaching to their actual position.

The use of qualitative method

According to Kahn and Cannell (1957), an interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people. The use of interviews can help the researcher to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to the research questions and objectives (Saunders and al, 2009). The key strength of this type of research is the uniqueness of the data, as most participants expressed that this was the first time that they talked to someone about personal issues on their career.

As qualitative research cannot be used to make statistical generalizations about the entire population, but remaining closer to the existing literature review and comparing it with the fresh data from respondents, the research might be validated (Mehmetoglu and Altinay, cited in Sok and al, 2011).

Sample size

The population of this study was women managers from supervisory positions excluding top management. Purposive sampling method was used as opposed to random sampling. Several authors (Hill et al., 2005) recommend using 8-15 participants to carry out a qualitative research. A comprehensive including face-to-face interview was conducted with 10 women managers from the public and private sectors in Mauritius.
Data collection

Face-to-face interviews were conducted and this exercise took place at the participant’s place of employment and varied between 45 minutes to 1 hour. As a tool to the data collection, the researcher noted the qualitative responses in a diary book. This medium facilitated the researcher in retrieving data from the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. The uses of diary book from the researcher own hand writing was very beneficial in keeping the interviewees’ responses until being transcribed. It was considered to be the most reliable way of data collection by the researcher as it provided the social and cultural context for behaviour, thus adding a valuable dimension to the research (Nath, 2000).

Respondents’ profile

The 10 respondents came from different functional backgrounds and were representatives from both public and private sectors. Their ages range from 25 to 59 years with a mean age of 41.9. Eight of the participants in the sample were married, with children. One participant was single and one divorce with one child. Seven women managers possessed a master degree, two hold a bachelor degree and one had a doctorate degree.

Research findings and discussion

This section contains the representation and analysis of the data gathered from the interview. It has been categorised into themes such as personality traits, educational qualifications, work experience, spousal support, parental backup and organizational support.

Personality traits

The majority of the women (9) who were interviewed considered themselves as hard workers and persistent. One interviewee was of the view that it was a matter of luck to be promoted as manager in her company. According to her, the employer did not wish to promote her as manager. As no option was available at that time, she got a chance to be promoted.

“This society is not an egalitarian one. Discrimination against women prevails everywhere. I do not raise my voice. What I know is that I am doing my job well and with integrity. I believe in reality, i.e. when my turn will come, I would have a better position. I do not like to fight like others [……]. Any woman who has patience and qualifications can be a manager at any time.”

Some of the women managers believed that without hard work and persistence, it would be very difficult for them to climb to upper rungs. Sometimes, they have to use masculine traits, otherwise they would not be able to progress in their organisations.

“This is normal in today’s society that women should use their masculine traits in order to be successful. I believe in gender equality, that’s why I cannot stick in the same position for my whole working life. To be a manager, I should show seriousness and assertiveness. I should be competent. If I don’t show these personal characteristics, I would lag behind.”

The findings concerning personality traits demonstrate that the majority of the women are found to be hardworking, persistent and dynamic. Possessing these characteristics has helped them to be managers in their respective organizations.

The personality traits for the majority of the women managers can be related to Van der Boon (2003) whereby perseverance, patience and integrity are attributes for women’s career progression.

Educational qualifications

All women were of the view that educational attainment was very important for their success as professionals. Educational attainment, at least up to a degree level was found to be the backbone of their achievement.

“My educational qualifications are my ‘passport’. Without my master degree it would be very difficult to reach at this position. Today, almost all people are qualified and they are prone to attain managerial position. Therefore, academics attainments played an important role in my career success.”
As stipulated by Carli (2010), women’s roles are as the primary caregivers. They are actually earning the majority of bachelors and advanced degrees and they are integrating further into management positions. Therefore, the majority of the women who were interviewed are in line with Carli’s argument.

**Work experience and skills**

Apart from educational qualifications, majority of the respondents considered their years of working experience as the source for their career success. Although all of the women managers possessed at least a bachelor degree, they were of the view that it was not enough to reach at managerial positions. They associated their working experiences to their actual positions, i.e. they firmly believed that both educational attainment and working experience were very important for their promotion. However, human capital such as working experience, skills and qualifications are found to be the supporting factors for women to move to upper rungs in their organisations (Probert, 2005).

“I was promoted based on merit. I could say that my working experiences and skills had contributed to my success. Apart from these, I also possess my educational background which was required for that managerial post. I had to wait for years to get a promotion because I was of the opinion that my organisation preferred male to be managers”.

**Spousal support**

The data collected from the interview showed that eight participants have praised their spouses of being supportive for their career progress. They viewed that their spouses to be supportive with regard to encouragement and love. Some women managers did not hesitate to show their emotional feelings towards their life partners.

“My husband cares for me and my two children. My spouse and I live in a symmetrical family where we share our family responsibilities in terms of house cores and child care. He is very caring and has patience to look after our kids. Very often, I reach office late because I have to wait for the nanny to come. In the afternoon, I reach home quite late due to the nature of my job. By the mean time, my husband looks after the kids and prepares the food. He never complains.”

As supported by Ezzedeen and Ritchey (2008), they suggested that spousal support for women managers are where each partner provides each other with practical help in the house cores as well as with the children and assistance with personal and family or work-related problems.

However, one respondent argued that her husband is not supportive at all. She has to look after her family before and after office hours, including her child responsibility.

“I am proud that I have been able to reach at this position. My child is my only support. And he has given me the courage to work harder.”

Today, not all female managers are in line with the traditional roles focusing only towards their family or staying at home. With modernisation, women tend to focus on their career and they are economically independent from patriarchy (Gatrell, 2007).

**Parental backup**

Parental support was seen as a major tool for women to make advancement in their career. Two respondents were of the view that their parents are the backbone for their achievement. Without the responsibility of child and family care, one respondent was free to concentrate in her career. Having enough spare time, she was able to pursue a doctoral degree which has helped her to be promoted quickly.

“I stay at work late without having to worry about family or child responsibility like others […]. I have more time to focus on my work and to be recognised by my employer as a hard worker. I am very committed to my work.”

“I live at my mother’s place since I have divorced. She is very caring. I do not have to worry about my child. Even though, my mother does the cooking and looks after my father who is bed rest. My mother is very traditional and she likes that. She is my god.”
Organisational support

The majority of the respondents considered that their organisations have supported them to climb the corporate ladder. They argued that they have been provided with both on-the-job and off-the-job training. Two respondents mentioned that they had attended international workshops. These have helped them for their capacity building.

“I have been given an opportunity to attend an international workshop in the USA. That was very beneficial for me as I met with several nationalities cadre. At the same time, I had built a network. Often, we communicate through WhatsApp. I have been invited for another conference which will be held shortly.”

According to Siebert and al. (2001), they argued that networking can improve career mobility through greater access to information, resources and sponsorship. Through networks individuals are more visible in organisations and women would be more at ease to share career development experiences and strategies, and learn from one another (Forret and Dougherty, 2004).

Wentling (2003) confirmed that education and training are of critical importance to women’s career development. The support from senior management, in terms of mentoring and incentives, are also important for the progress of women managers in organisations. To be successful, a high level of commitment from both management and employees are essential (Clarke, 2011).

Other respondents were of the view that their senior mates have contributed for their attainment. Listening to the advice of senior officers was a sort of training. Good working relations with colleagues and higher management were also considered as supporting factors.

“I have been always a good listener vis-à-vis my superiors. I do my job according to the mission of my organisation. I work with integrity and I am very collaborative towards management. I am committed to my work and very often I resolve many problems. There is certain element of trust between myself and management”.

Conclusion

Women have entered the workforce which was once reserved for men. With societal evolution, there has been a numerous increase of women in the working fields and some of them have become managers in their respective organisations. The presence of women managers is visible compared to women as housewives at some decades ago (Schwanke, 2013). The findings of this research demonstrate that educational attainment, personality traits, family support and organisational support have contributed for the success of women to become managers in organisations.

Limitations and implications for future research

As a diary book was used to record the responses from the participants, the researcher might not have collected the data exactly from them. Hence, extensive in-depth studies by using different medium on the theme could give better results. This study also cannot be generalised to all women managers for their current career success. Although the findings provide some contributions to the theoretical framework, future research is needed to analyse the successful factors for women’s career advancement in more organisations.
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