

Exploring the challenges faced by female executives in the Malaysian oil palm plantation industry: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Study regarding the life experiences of female executive planters in Malaysia's oil palm plantation sector is sparse. This gap is significant as Malaysia's plantation sector is beginning to hire more female employees, especially at the executive levels such as assistant manager and estate manager posts. Female employees account for 20-25% of the total plantation workforce in Malaysia, according to major palm oil companies. Despite their significant contribution and role in an oil palm plantation, females' efforts have been overshadowed by their male colleagues. This raises the question of why this situation occurs and how it affects female executive planters in Malaysian oil palm plantations. Hence, this research aimed to establish and assess the individual experiences of female executive planters. The focus will be on the current situation of female executives in the oil palm plantation industry, together with the challenges faced by female executives when working in the oil palm plantation industry. A qualitative study was conducted with eight female executive planters who participate in the oil palm plantation industry in Peninsular Malaysia to identify their life experiences, assess the current situation, and explore the challenges faced working as executive planters in the oil palm plantation industry in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants using the snowball sampling method based on the availability of female executive planters in Peninsular Malaysia. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) and categorized into six themes. The analysis revealed that their current situation and challenges were associated with job nature, acceptance, physical work, safety, managing worker, and stereotypes. These findings were expected to have significant information to add to the literature on female roles and their participation in the oil palm plantation industry. Thus, it can help to formulate plans to enhance the situation for the female executive planter in the oil palm plantation industry in the future.

1. Introduction

Malaysia's population was estimated at 32.7 million in 2020, an increase from 32.5 million in 2019, with a 0.4% yearly growth rate (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Males also outnumbered females by a significant margin. With 16.8 million males and 15.9 million females in 2020, in both the young and working-age categories, males outnumbered females. Moreover, females account for 1.2 million of the elderly population, while males account for just 1.1 million in 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). Department

of Statistics Malaysia (2020) also mentioned that the country's sex ratio maintained at 106 males for every 100 females.

At the national level, the labour force participation rate (LFPR) of females in the second quarter of 2020 was 55%, a decline of 0.8% from the previous quarter. The highest female LFPR in the labour market was 72.6% for those aged 25 to 34, followed by 67.3% for those aged 35 to 44, and 58.8% for those aged 45 to 54. Although a married woman's labour supply fluctuates throughout her

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life, the tendency is that as she approaches her childbearing and childrearing years, she continues to reduce the quantity of work she does (Gregorio, 2019).

Males tend to join the labour for a consistent monthly income, therefore agricultural activities in rural regions were typically dominated by females rather than males. Adding to this, Chen *et al.* (2019) found that males, rather than females, have a better chance of entering the workforce since they may readily join any sort of labour employment. Women are primarily represented as stay-at-home spouses who live in rural areas, grow vegetables for food, and help their husbands to provide additional income for their families. Therefore, most females are involved in rural agricultural activities in comparison to males (Diirro *et al.*, 2018; Doss, 2018).

The study regarding the life experiences of female executive planters in Malaysia's oil palm plantation sector is sparse. This gap is significant as the Malaysian plantation sector is beginning to hire more female employees, especially at the executive levels such as assistant manager and estate manager posts. Female employees account for 20-25% of the total plantation workforce in Malaysia, according to several major palm oil companies (Sime Darby, 2020; KLK, 2020). Despite their significant contribution and role in the industry, females' efforts have been overshadowed by their male colleagues.

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), the Malaysia Gender Gap Index (MGGI) was at 0.709, or 70.9%, in 2019. The MGGI measures the gender gap in four sub-indices which are Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational Attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment. A score of 1.0 (100%) shows that gender equality has been

achieved. It was revealed that women outperformed males in the Educational Attainment sub-index, with a score of 1.053. While the Health and Survival sub-index had a score of 0.958, Economic Participation and Opportunity received a score of 0.717. However, the LFPR for women remained low in 2019 at 55.6%, compared to other affluent nations such as Australia (72.5%) and Singapore (69.1%). In general, women's LFPR in developed countries exceeds 60%. The report also shows that even females outperformed males in terms of Educational Attainment which can also be seen in the breakdown of employees by position and gender in the oil palm plantation sector.

The inequality of genders in the sector has raised questions on why this situation occurs and how it affects female executive planters in the Malaysia oil palm plantation. Hence, this research aimed to establish and assess an individual's experience as a female executive planter. The focus will be on the current situation of female executives in the oil palm plantation industry, and the challenges they faced working in the oil palm plantation industry.

2. Materials and methods

The study was conducted in Peninsular Malaysia. The sample of this study involves eight participants of female executive planters ranging from the positions of Cadet Planter to Estate Manager aged between 23 to 37 years old as in Table 1. A qualitative method with a phenomenology approach was chosen as the research method for this study because it allowed for comprehensive insights into the life experience of the female planters from their perspectives. The participants were recruited during the research using the snowball sampling method. This method was used when accessing participants with the desired characteristics is

Table 1. Background information of the participants.

No.	Pseudo Name	Age	Working Experience	Marital Status	Position	Background
1	Brilliant	34	13	Married	Estate Manager	Brilliant is a Malay woman, she has formal education in the agricultural study (ISP) and currently pursuing her master's degree in plantation management
2	Bunga	23	1.5	Single	Cadet Planter	Bunga is a Malay woman, who studied horticulture during her undergraduate course
3	Cempaka	26	1.25	Single	Assistant Manager	Cempaka is an Indian woman, who has formal knowledge related to agriculture.
4	Dahlia	35	1.5	Married	Assistant Manager	Dahlia is a Malay woman, who studied a degree in plantation management and worked elsewhere before joining the plantation sector.
5	Flora	26	1	Married	Assistant Manager	Flora is an Indian woman, who does not have any formal knowledge related to agriculture.
6	Jasmin	37	15	Married	Assistant Manager	Jasmin is a Malay woman, who graduated in chemical engineering
7	Kusuma	34	13	Married	Assistant Manager	Kusuma is a Malay woman with a degree in the agriculture-related study.
8	Mawar	25	1.25	Single	Cadet Planter	Mawar is a Malay woman, who has formal knowledge in plantation industry management.

challenging (Naderifar et al., 2017). In addition, the snowball method helps the researcher to interact with the samples more successfully since they are associated with the first sample and the first sample is tied to the researcher.

The participants' accounts of their participation in the oil palm plantation sector along with their beliefs and feelings were tape-recorded in semi-structured interviews, transcribed, and subjected to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2003). The participants were initially asked about their willingness to contribute to the study. According to Kumar (2018), it is unethical in research conduct to obtain data without the participants' knowledge and willingness. Therefore, the researcher made it clear to all participants that their involvement was from their intention to voluntarily participate in the study, and they are without any obligation to withdraw at any time. Each interview was qualitatively and manually analysed by searching for recurring themes across a data set. The data were collected by conducting interview sessions and the data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic Analysis is a technique for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each transcription was inspected to have an insight into participants' perceptions. Next, the initial theme is generated and reviewed to define the main themes and subthemes. The following table illustrates the background information of all participants involved in this study.

3. Results

3.1 Theme 1: physical work

All participants agreed that there are challenges that they must overcome as female executive planters. They revealed that they must be strong not only mentally but physically. One participant described the tasks that are always given to women and how those tasks are physically demanding:

Lady planters require more commitment when doing details-related work, we have frequently been given data collection tasks and office work such as doing paperwork or keying in data. Data collection can be regarded as physical work because we need to physically be there to collect data and the process can be hard and sometimes for long hours. (Brilliant)

One participant acknowledged that there are biological differences between males and females and how the work is not only emotionally but physically demanding as well:

Quite tough especially for women because of biological differences if I can guess? Because the work is physically demanding, mentally and emotionally exhausting especially when there is an issue or when audit is coming, a lot of work. (Bunga)

Cempaka and four others reported that the work given to them is always physically demanding regardless of their gender:

The work also can get physically demanding, you need to carry this, you need to carry that, but not to the point that is the same as labour workers. Does not matter what your gender is, the work is the same. (Cempaka)

There is no difference in terms of roles or workload. No difference in how long I have to be in the field compared to male exec, we have the same position, so we need to do the same work even if the work is physically demanding. (Dahlia)

Another participant reported that all executive planters need to do the same work regardless of gender:

As a planter, we are required to be in the field at the same time as all the workers working time, which is from 6.30 am until 2.30 pm, do the same work as our male co-workers no exception. This applies to all executives irrespective of their gender. (Flora)

Two of the participants noted no differences between work done by them as a female and by their male counterparts:

60% field, 40% administration. This means 60% of the time I need to be in the field doing the same work as the male executive and every day is a day for new challenges and it is to be prepared for any unforeseen circumstances. (Jasmin)

I can say that the time, the physical aspect of the job is equal between male and female, we need to spend time in the office doing office work and be in the field to observe the workers whether they are doing their work or not. And there is no difference between gender in terms of work, both doing the same work. (Mawar)

Interestingly, Kusuma mentioned that when she was pregnant, all the daily work she did became increasingly difficult for her to perform, and she chose to take maternity leave:

When you are pregnant the usual hard work becomes harder and harder. Especially when nearing the labour date, because the job scope and routine are still the same even if you are pregnant. Like me, when I am pregnant, I just take maternity leave and do not bother

myself with work. (Kusuma)

3.2 Theme 2: safety

All participants agreed that safety is a significant challenge for them when working in the oil palm plantation industry. They must take extra care of themselves, especially during work and some of them who live in the estate compound, need to be vigilant even outside working hours. One person stated that it is important for those who work in the plantation sector to always be alert when working to maintain their security:

Safety and security are important aspects that need to be considered when working in the plantation sector. Because we always face situations that threaten our safety. (Brilliant)

Bunga spoke about her feeling insecure while in the estate because of the isolated location. She mentioned that if something bad happens to her, she felt like help will arrive late because of the remote location:

The fact that it is isolated, I feel somewhat unsafe sometimes because in my mind, if something happens to me here, help is very far away. For now, I have never faced any dangerous situation and I hope that I never need to face them. (Bunga)

Two participants acknowledged how being a female posed a greater risk to their safety when working in the oil palm plantation industry:

Especially in the field and the fact that I am a woman posed a greater risk because I have heard of sexual harassment cases that happened on the plantation from both foreign and local workers. I will always be extra cautious especially when I go to the block alone (Cempaka)

There is a major risk especially in terms of security and safety as ladies. Nevertheless, we need to know our surroundings, be good to people and be firm in our decision. Doing those I believe will reduce the confrontation with other employees to deal with that could threaten our safety. (Jasmin)

One participant described the dangerous nature of her work as even higher when their gender is female:

It is a high risk because working in the plantation is regarded as 3Ds which are dirty, dangerous, and difficult and the risk is more when you are female. Because the nature of the work is not made for women, physically I mean. Because sometimes you need to do physical work such as loading the oil palm when there is not enough labour worker. (Mawar)

Another participant described how she does not encounter any dangerous situations because she always avoids placing herself in such situations. However, she highlighted that she heard other stories regarding safety issues that occur to other female executive planters working in estate:

For the time being there is no dangerous situation that I encounter personally 'alhamdulillah.' However, I have heard stories about a female worker being sexually harassed, some even get into a fight with workers because of pay issues. Sometimes when it does not feel right or when the situation seems suspicious, I just turn my back off. (Kusuma)

For two of the participants, they understand the risks that come with the work, however, they also mentioned the importance of extra safety precautions to reduce those risks:

The risk is there, but if we take care of ourselves, we will be okay. For example, we need to make sure that we do not go out to the field alone, make sure that other people know where we are going and when will we get back and make sure to watch out for wild animals, because in plantation there is lots of them. At home, I always make sure that I lock all the doors especially when I am alone. (Dahlia)

I believe there are risks for everyone whether it is a woman or man being in this field. It is up to us really on how we can handle them as for some the situation could be very dangerous but for others, it is something they could handle easily. As to answer your question, for me, it is a job that entails very high-risk and dangerous work as going into the field by motorbike is itself quite risky especially if the roads are quite bad. (Flora)

3.3 Theme 3: managing male workers

In relation to workers' management, most participants acknowledged their jobs have a lot to do with managing the workforce that is on the estate where they work. Two of the participants spoke about how their work centered around supervising workers ensuring their work complies with estate standards:

With my position as an assistant estate manager, my work overall is supervision to achieve targeted CPO, upkeep and maintaining the field, workers' welfare, occupational safety, and health (OSH). (Dahlia)

The task in general is to allocate the workers for their daily operations and ensure daily operations are executed. Also, the other job scope is to maintain the work programme and any other adhoc work. (Flora)

Another participant revealed that her duties were not

only focused on estate-related duties but also include personal matters of the employees: *inadequate leadership abilities. (Kusuma)*

All the usual work, plus sometimes I need to solve the workers' personal issues, family, financial and sometimes crimes. Some of them are caught doing drugs, so we need to report it and send the worker to rehab. (Jasmin)

Mawar acknowledged that most of her work is managing workers and making sure that they achieve the production required by the estate:

Most of the work I do here is managing the workers, what is their work for the day or week such as harvesting, and what they need to work on in order to achieve the production requirements. (Mawar)

3.4 Theme 4: stereotypes

The participants revealed that one of the challenges that they need to overcome as female executives is stereotyping. One participant spoke about negative perceptions by society towards them as a female who works in the plantation sector. She also added that these perceptions have an impact on her mentally:

Societal perceptions of women working in plantations. People will ask why we as women choose to work in this field or if can we really do the work as well as the men. All this perception always be a challenge because it plays with our mental. (Brillian)

Bunga revealed that her seniors and superiors disapproved of her because she was a woman, she also stated that she was looked down upon because of her gender:

Stereotypes. Old timers, like managers, senior assistants etcetera or superiors in general, tend to disapprove of women due to our nature. Women are known to be soft and fragile, so they tend to trust less in us. 'Bahasa kasarnya, pandang rendah.' (Bunga)

One participant described how superiors are reluctant to hire female employees on the ground that women have long maternity leave:

Maternity leave, most bosses do not like to take female employees because of this thing, 90 days leave. if in the plantation, it is considered a long holiday, hahaha. (Dahlia)

Another participant felt that one of the most difficult challenges is addressing male stereotypes about their ability as women:

Among the most difficult challenges was dealing with men's stereotypes about women as sensitive or having

4. Discussion

The qualitative data has revealed the challenges faced by female executives working in the plantation sector which include physical work, safety, managing male workers, and stereotyping. Gender inequalities in oil palm systems are in many ways rooted in structures and norms that predate oil palm. However, the way in which oil palm is expanding, there are risks of exacerbating pre-existing inequalities and introducing new ones.

4.1 Physical work

Oil palm production is considered a 'masculine domain' and women's contributions are rendered invisible or marginal, with considerable implications for who can benefit from the value of oil palm at different points along the chain. The participants in this study illustrated physical work as harsh and challenging because of gender differences and limitations. Previous studies have shown that labour-intensive work, inadequate physical strength, and hormone cycles add to the emotional strain of working in a male-dominated occupation (Martin and Barnard, 2013).

4.2 Safety

The women in this study reported that safety is a notable challenge for them. Besides the health issues, violence and sexual harassment are also risks faced by females in oil palm plantations. This is agreed by Pradipta (2017), where women in oil palm plantations operate in unsafe working conditions and always get an unfair share of income in Indonesia. They also must engage in long working hours and the activities include high mobility from one area to another inviting work pacing. Moreover, the work is more hazardous being around harvesting, loading, and unloading of heavy oil palm fruit, pest control that involves heavy use of chemicals, and pruning area. According to World Rainforest Movement (2021), oil palm plantations are one of the most unsafe spaces for women, not only because of their vulnerable working status packed with injustices and precarity but also because of the potential for sexual violence and harassment that lurks them in and around the plantation fields.

4.3 Managing male workers

Most participants in this study perceived managing male workers as a challenging task. The participants admitted that they always need to increase their efforts to ensure that their male colleagues responded to their ideas and suggestions. They were constantly putting

themselves under pressure to prove to their co-workers and superiors that they could work in the estate environment. This finding supports Johari *et al.* (2012), who reported that male-dominated companies offer males the most authority and influence over choices, which might have a significant effect on females. Women executives experience challenges not faced by their male counterparts because of the male-dominant management culture that privileges men, ranks some men above others, and places women on the periphery of the managerial class. Females are more likely to experience a conflict in holding a position as an executive planter in the oil palm plantation environment. The findings also found that most interviewees admitted that working in male-dominated environments meant they received less appreciation and acknowledgement than their male counterparts, who were often surprised to discover a female working as an executive planter. The participants mentioned that their gender negatively affected their careers and thought it was part of the learning curve. This situation was rooted in the notion that managerial work is a masculine job. The findings concur with Bradley (2013) and Durbin (2016) that management work is perceived as a masculine career, with attributes such as aggression, decisiveness, and independence, although women's qualities in management may differ from those of their male counterparts.

4.4 Stereotypes

The pressures placed on female executives are complex and derive in part from the relation between stereotypes about managerial positions and stereotypes about gender. When newcomers who are different in terms of gender join an established homogeneous group, they can represent a potential challenge to the majority, then it became more challenging when they needed to disprove the conservative mentality that males made better leaders. The above situations could be explained in a way that, although these females were already at a senior stage in their careers, older workers held such attitudes not used to having a female leader. This negative mindset still prevails due to the reluctance of males towards seeing successful females that have the same career or hold the same position as them, which confirms that “think manager think male” (Schein, 2001) is not only a phenomenon in Western countries but a phenomenon in Malaysia too. However, some participants interviewed expressed that they had never met any gender discrimination and were accepted by the other staff members. The finding supports Mokhtar (2020) that there has been a significant movement in the social attitude toward female top management in the workplace.

There was unmistakable evidence that women in non-traditional careers were more likely to face career challenges in different forms. In Malaysia, Johari *et al.* (2012) argued that male-dominated workplaces give men the most power and influence over decisions, which in turn could affect women dramatically. The findings echoed previous research that women may feel a sense of isolation, bias, or not fitting in the workplace because it was rare to have women in a male-dominated field (Powell *et al.*, 2009). Female managers, especially in male-dominated workplaces, are highly visible and this can make them vulnerable as targets of prejudice and hostile responses in facing the competing demands of their roles as women and as managers (Watts, 2009).

5. Conclusion

Finding success in a male-dominated industry is a challenge, but it is not impossible for females. If they are willing to put in the work, show up with results, and use the resources available to expand, they will be able to overcome any obstacle in their path. The data analysis of eight interviews with female executive planters has allowed the researchers to unfold the real phenomenon of women's experiences, as well as their well-being in the plantation industry. Along with all these factors, all participants agreed that physical work, safety, managing male workers, and stereotyping are the challenges that they must deal with in the industry. However, some women manage to forge successful careers, over many years, in work environments dominated by men. The industry can learn and get closer to the problem by listening to these women.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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