

The Gendered Nature of Careers: Evidence From A Malaysian University

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ABSTRACT

Career is an area through which its interaction with gender explains the dynamism between men, women, work and organizations. It is argued that career is gendered i.e. it goes according to marked divisions of men and women. However, the question of the gendered nature of career is still less understood. This article aims to highlight emerging concepts and realities about the gendered nature of careers. The paper first theorizes gender and careers, presents some data on demography, employment and career positions by gender in Malaysia and in a selected university in the country. The paper then highlights the implications of the gendered nature of careers to individuals and the institution; and finally draws conclusions and identifies challenges in terms of policy development in higher education.

Keywords: Career, gender, career development

INTRODUCTION

Debates about the meaning of gender evolved at the same time that the fields of gender and its parent disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, history, literature, economics and education, greatly expanded and became more established. Oakley (1972) and Whitehead (1979) were among the earlier scholars who distinguished between 'sex' and gender. Sex is a biological characteristic while gender is a set of socio-cultural constructs such as roles, responsibilities and expectations of men and women. Too often, however, there is conflicting understanding about the meaning of gender due to the qualities attached to its meaning which are shaped by various social processes where societies have differing perceptions on those processes (Ismail, 2006).

This article aims to highlight emerging concepts and realities about gender and career. The paper first theorizes gender and career, and presents some data on demography and employment in Malaysia, and career positions by gender in a selected institution of higher learning in the country. The data used in this paper were secondary data obtained from the Department of Statistics (Malaysia, 2006; 2008) and the Registrar Division of the institution concerned. This paper then highlights implications of the gendered nature of career for individuals and institution; and finally draws conclusions and identifies challenges in terms of institutional policy development.

Theorizing Gender and Careers

The traditional meaning of career is always associated with the question of one's choice of a job, which is affected by one's self concept about the job i.e. towards fulfilling one's needs, and is life-stage related. Development of one's career is a complex process and takes time, and therefore, according to Ismail, Krauss and Ismail (2007), career development processes affect individuals' and organizational strengths to create powerful synergy between employees, professions and the workplace. Career as a function of gender means that there are strong connotations of differences between the career experiences of men and women, parallel with gender differences in other areas of social processes such as education, participation in politics, access to resources and cultural expectations on men and women by society.

A theory that is related to gender and career is Gottfredson's (1996) Theory of Circumscription and Compromise. This theory refers to one's perception of the gender type of job, prestige level of job and the amount of effort necessary to attain an occupation. Meanwhile, 'compromise' signifies job accessibility and the need to adjust the implementation of one's occupational aspirations. The author outlines four career development stages which emphasizes the development of self-concept. This is in line with Super (1990) who suggests that career aspirations are the manifestations of one's self-concept beginning from the early age to adult stage of an individual in which boys and girls will have different perceptions and expectations of which jobs are suitable for them.

There are assumptions that form the basis in theorizing career as a gendered concept. The assumptions are as follows: (a) ideas of difference and (b) gender relations. The ideas of difference are basically rooted in the familiar beliefs of differences between sexes, i.e. physical differences. The discussion on ideas of difference is adopted from Connell's (2002) three influential conceptualizations: the body as a machine; the idea of two separate realms of sex and gender; and the idea of gender as a symbolic system.

- i) *The Body as Machine*. The body as machine centers on the notion that men and women are different due to the biological characteristics of the reproductive function. This difference affects a whole range of other differences such as bodily strength, physical skills, sexual functions, recreational interests, character of aggression versus nurturance, and so on. It is widely assumed and understood that these differences are extensive and that they are natural. Models of the body as a machine producing gender differences are advanced by men, used against feminist ideas of 'gender roles' thought to lead to women's subordination. According to Trigiani (1999) and Connell (2002), the idea of natural differences between genders, often presented as scientific truth, are violated by societies and rejected by women studies' scholars. The terms 'male violence' and 'male sexuality' are among the hegemonic character of male on female, implicitly linking behavior to the body. In relation to career, it is assumed that men's dominance in society is an expression of greater physical strength and their ability to compete with women for strategic and high ranking jobs. It should be reemphasized that the concept of body as machine is affected by social processes.
- (ii) *The Realm of Sex and Gender*. There is a pervasive constraint in relation to the persistence of dualisms and dichotomies, such as nature-culture and femininity-masculinity. In terms of economic production, this dichotomy is equated with unpaid vs. paid jobs and women-men's labor equated with user vs. exchange values (Hansen, 2002). The persistence of these two realms, poses challenges to understanding the natural differences between men and women, and to a certain extent it is difficult to justify women's disadvantaged position in employment including career. Following an influential analysis of the 'sex vs. gender' sphere by Grossman and Grossman (1993:62) and Connell (2002:34), it was concluded that: "Societies have the option of minimizing, rather than maximizing sex differences through their socialization practices. A society could, for example, devote its energies more towards moderating male aggression than towards preparing women to submit to male aggression, or towards encouraging rather than discouraging male nurturance activities".

One of the implications of the above statement is that to have reform agendas, especially in educational choices, particularly among boys and girls. There should be a cessation of only boys dominating courses in mathematics, science and technology, and vice versa boys should be encouraged to take on courses that are traditionally dominated by girls such as those in social sciences and humanities. Randall (2008) calls for the reciprocity whereby society needs to encourage men and women to be involved in their respective 'non-traditional careers'. Examples of nontraditional careers for men are bank tellers, cashiers, cosmetologists, librarians, hair stylists and care workers; and for women are mechanics, pilots, chefs, engineers, architects and film directors. This suggests that there should be a move towards reconstruction of a more fair male-female proportion to the extent that there will be no occupation that is defined as, to use Singh's (2002) term, a 'single-sex occupation'.

- (iii) *Gender as a Symbolic System*. The idea of gender as a symbolic system means that bodies are treated as surfaces on which symbols or images are made or painted. The ideology of gender as a symbolic system gives far reaching implications to men and women, one of which is in relation to career. Men's bodies are symbolized as masculine and more appropriate for a certain job and job position in the imagery of advertising, film, news reports and mass media. In contrast, women's bodies are symbolized as feminine, sex objects and suitable only for supportive, decorative and advertising functions, as well as for non-instrumental tasks (Broadbridge & Hearn, 2008).

The term 'gender relations', on the other hand, signifies the importance to move from a focus on difference to a focus on interdependency. The patterns of relations between men and women inevitably affect social phenomena, one of which is career. Modern analyses by Roces and Edwards (2000), Connell (2002) and Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) describe four structures of gender relations, namely, power relations, production relations, emotional relations and symbolic relations. Power, as a dimension of gender, was central to the Women's Liberation concept of patriarchy and the social phenomena that comes from it, such as the idea of men as a dominant sex class in the analyses of rape, sexual

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violence or sexual harassment, bullying and wife battering as an assertion of men's power over women. Its relevance to career, for instance, is its close association with the notion of the glass ceiling i.e. an abstract barrier that limits women's vertical progression due to patriarchal powers in the organization. The glass ceiling, according to Flanders (1994), and Kumra and Vinnicombe (2008) has been identified as an invisible barrier that women confront as they approach top positions within the organization.

Production relations of gender is related to sexual division of labor, and was the first structure of gender to be recognized in social science and it remains the centre of discussion until today. Sexual or gender division of labor describes the situation where certain tasks are performed by men and others by women. According to Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) gender division of labor, in many instances, leads to hierarchical (jobs positions where managers are normally men and secretarial staff are women) and horizontal (centre-periphery where central activities are more performed by men and frontline or marginal activities are often staffed by women) gendered distribution of jobs. Gender division of labor also leads to formal and informal gendered management and authority. This may impact men and women especially if the organizations are dominated by masculine values. If that is the case, women employees would face more barriers to career advancement as were observed in an engineering-based firm (Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008).

Emotional relations relate to the attraction between individuals due to differences in sex. Therefore, households are expected to be formed on the basis of emotional attachments between two partners or spouses, and later individuals in the families; and emotional relations are sometimes nonlinear or reciprocal, instead they are hierarchical. Finally, symbolic relations explain the complex system of understandings, implications, overtones, labeling and allusions about men and women that have accumulated through cultural history. This is related to the idea of gender as a symbolic system as mentioned earlier.

The implications of the concept of gender relations on men's and women's career are numerous. First, there is a direct influence on women's progression in career depending on organizational climate such as leadership style, whether masculine or feminine (Koshal, Gupta & Koshal, 1998). Organizations that are gender-sensitized will have better opportunities for both men and women to progress in their career. Second, the perpetuation of production relations based on gender based division of labor would be unavoidable. It is well understood that the division of tasks should work harmoniously and in fact complementarily. It is, however, important to ensure that the concept of 'separate but equal' (White and Hastuti, 1980; Wacjman, 1998) be followed through so as to achieve the goal of gender balance, and not to lead to gender conflict, earlier popularized by Trigiani (1999). Third, gender and emotional relations is important in any organization and so individuals are expected to have mutual respect and understanding for each other. Finally, gender and symbolic relations suggest diversity in characteristics between men and women, and this diversity, as Mavin (2001) and Arokiasamy and Ismail (2008) put it, should be taken as a source of challenge for the management and leadership of the organization to strive for survival in the modern era of employment. It is worth noting here that the implications mentioned above are in reality interacting with each other. As such, organizations with some forms of gender-sensitized initiatives are said to operationalise all the above forms of gender relations.

Gendered Career Pattern

Driver's (1994) definition of career is adopted in which it delineates four basic patterns of career that relates to gender. The patterns are indicated as follows: (i) *Steady-state*: Career choice is made once for a life-time commitment to an occupation; (ii) *Linear*: Career activity continues throughout life as one moves up an occupational ladder; (iii) *Spiral*: Career choice evolves through a series of occupations where each new choice builds on the past and develops new skills in a cyclical manner; and (iv) *Transitory*: Career choice is almost continuous in which fields, organizations and jobs change over a certain number of intervals with a variety dominant forces. This description is based on objective career patterns.

The steady-state and linear-career types, common in career literature, are regarded as the typical hierarchical careers occupied in the past by males, while the spiral and transitory types are especially applicable to women. This newer meaning of career is further supported by Pool and Langan-Fox (1997) whereby they define a career as progress of life in order to incorporate the notion of periods of unemployment and unpaid work. This is because the later types

address the concerns of women of unemployment, retrenchment, or career-breaks due to child-bearing and child-rearing, marital, and family phases. Woodd's (1999) analysis of gendered career patterns shows that women normally follow a career pattern which has the characteristics of flexibility, transferable skills and part-time and temporary work. To adopt Driver's (1994) concept, women follow spiral and transitory types of careers. The optimistic analysis by Woodd (1999) concludes that typical female employment patterns are suitable in today's economic scenario and so women are said to be more adaptable to modern careers that are characterized by organizational dynamism and technological dependence.

Further evidence of the gendered nature of career is noted in Malaysian studies that hypothesize that employed women suffer from work and family conflicts more than their husbands (Ahmad, 2006). It is similarly found by Mavin (2001) that a common experience of many employed women is the conflict between work and family roles. Circumstances and responsibilities often force women to choose between upward mobility in career and family stability in the home, or even to emphasize more on the family and very minimally on career. Measuring career success is another aspect of the gendered nature of careers in which women require a combination of both objective and subjective variables. The traditional male model of career success is no longer reliable to capture the realm of women's careers which requires both career interpretations.

Evidence of Gendered Career

Selected Demographic and Employment Data on Malaysian Men and Women

The population of Malaysia stands at 27.17 millions as at December 2007, of which the breakdown by males and females is 13.83 (50.97 %) and 13.34 (49.03 %) millions, respectively. Specifically, the birth rate and infant mortality rates are higher for males (17.7 and 6.7 %) than females (17.2 and 5.9 %) and life expectancy for males (71.7 years) is lower than that of females (76.5 years). These data explain some of the reasons for the difference in total population by gender (see Table 1).

Table 1: Some Characteristics of Malaysian Population by Gender, 2005 and 2007

Characteristics	Male	Female
Population (Total 27.17 mil) 2007	13.83 (50.97 %)	13.34 (49.03 %)
Birth rate (Child birth/1000 pop.) 2007	17.7	17.2
Life expectancy (years) 2007	71.7	76.5
Infant mortality rate (No. of deaths of infant/1000 live births) 2007	6.7	5.9
Labor force participation (% in 2005) (Total 10,413.4 mil)	64.3	35.7
Workforce with tertiary education (% in 2005)	16.2	24.1

Source: Malaysia (2008).

There are differences in terms of population by gender throughout the age groups. The population at the age group of 4 years old and below for males is 1,608.7 thousands and female, 1,507.5 thousands. This gender difference continues throughout the economically active population of ages 15 to 64 years after which females exceed the male population (as indicated by an arrow in Figure 1). Figure 2 further shows data on percentage of workforce by educational attainment in 2005 in which women exceed the percentage of men for the extreme workforce categories. The categories are within the group of those with no formal education, where the percentage of women (6.5 %) is higher than men (3.7 %), and workforce with tertiary education. This implies that currently Malaysian women enjoy better educational achievements compared to those in the past three decades. As a whole, however, labor force participation of women is about half that of men, even though currently the workforce with tertiary education is 16.2 % for men and 24.1 % for women, respectively. The better representation of women compared to men is due to the increase in female graduates from tertiary institutions in the country. When the data are compared with those of a European country e.g. Finland, the gender pattern is similar but the figures are higher, at 31 % and 39 %, respectively (Jokivuori, 2007). This shows that the better representation of women in the workforce by educational level is a universal phenomenon.

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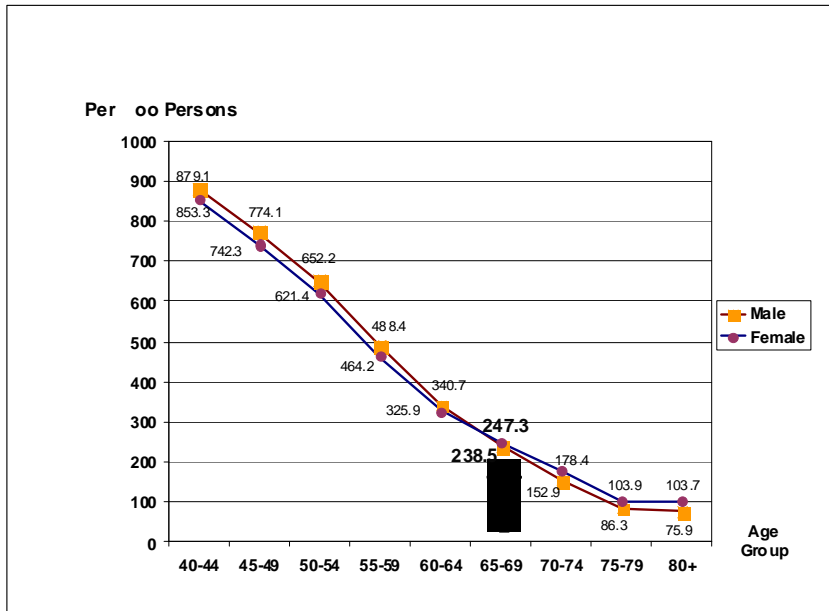


Figure 1: Malaysian population by age groups, 2007

Source: Malaysia (2008).

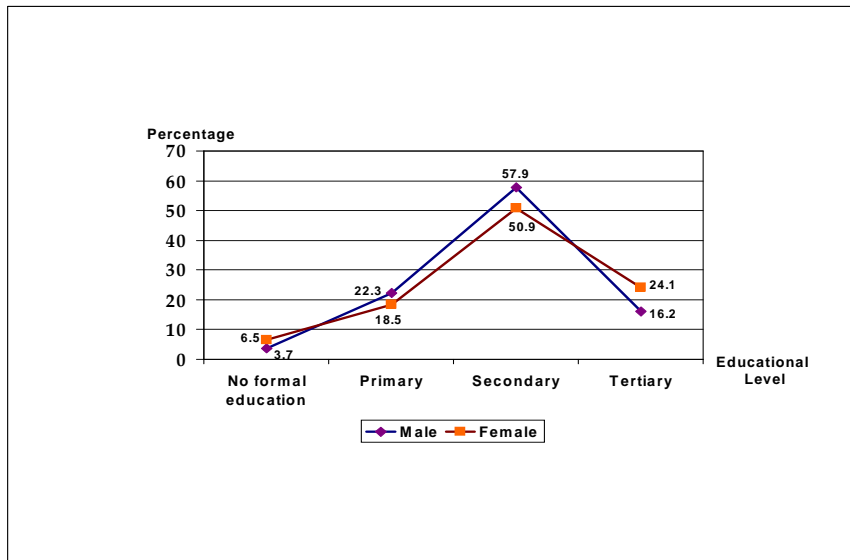


Figure 2: Workforce by Educational Attainment and Gender, 2005

Source: Malaysia (2006).

The implications of the data are: First, the population in the primary, secondary and tertiary education levels as well the labor force participation should indicate more males than females. This is as expected but when it is taken based on workforce with tertiary education the reverse is seen as shown in the figures alluded to earlier. A question arises: Where do the educated men go in terms of employment? Second, the bulk of the workforce is occupied by males

with primary and secondary level education. Another question arises: What are the strategies taken by the country to increase the number of male graduates? These suggest for further research in the areas.

Evidence in an Institution of Higher Learning

Student Population

Academia is another area in which the dynamic nature of gender and career can be observed. For this purpose the population of students at both undergraduate and graduate levels as well as the academics of a selected university in which Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) was used in this analysis.

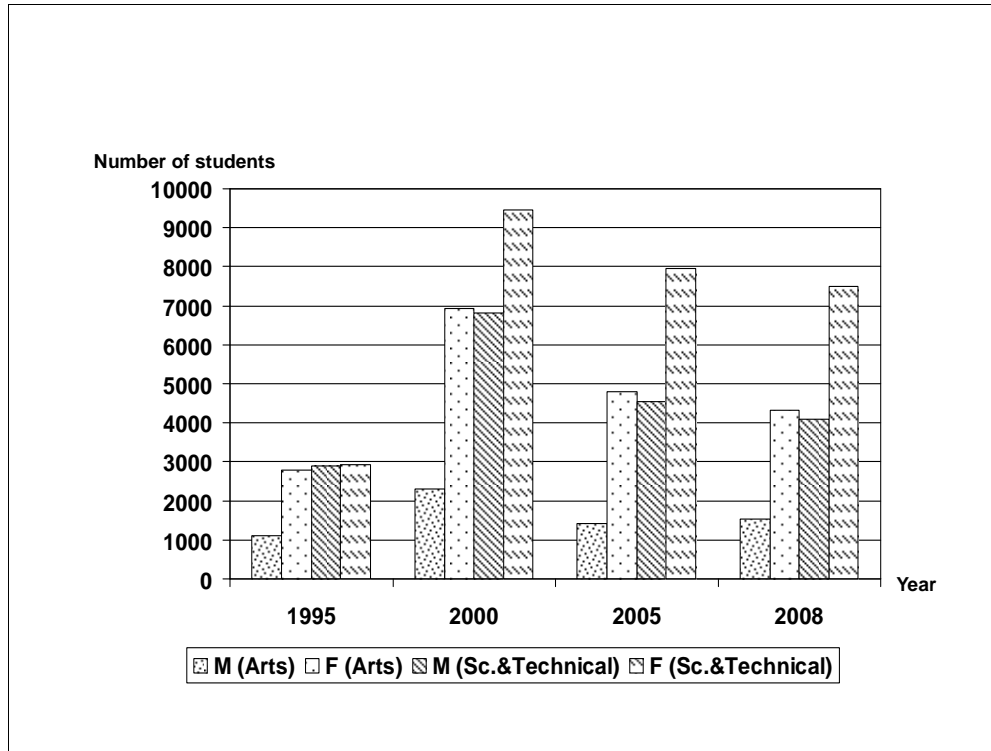


Figure 3: Undergraduate students of UPM by gender, fields of study, 1995 to 2008.

Source: UPM (2008a)

Figure 3 shows time series data for the undergraduate population at UPM from 1995 to 2008, by gender and field of study. It is very clear that females have been dominating the campus population and especially the fields of science and technology, from 1995 to 2008, and the gender gap became very distinct as the university's population increased to the present total of 17,477. The male to female ratio currently stands at 32 % and 68 % or 1:2. However, among the graduate student population, the situation is slightly different (Figure 4). While female students are still dominating the programs, particularly at the Master's level, their presence in PhD programs is consistently lower than their male counterparts, for the period 2004 to 2007. This differentiation could be related to the earlier notion of the gendered nature of career in which vertical career movement still favors men over women as the decision to go for higher education e.g. PhD is strongly related to moving up the career ladder.

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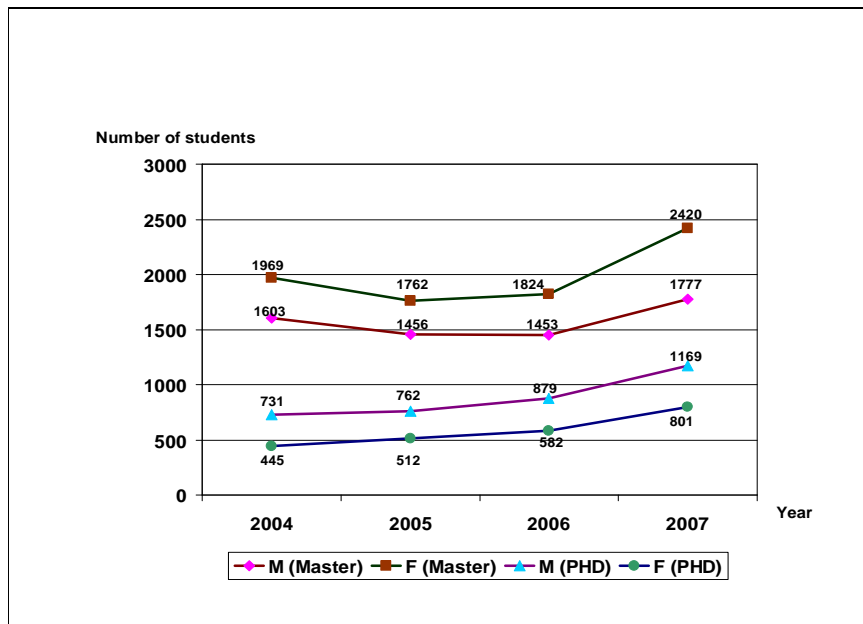


Figure 4: Postgraduate students at UPM, 2004 to 2007.
Source: UPM (2008b).

Careers of Academics

Table 2 shows the gender proportions of full-time academics in selected Commonwealth countries, in 2000. Based on the year 2000 data as reported by Singh (2002), there was no clear indication of difference between the proportion of women and men academic staff in developed and developing countries of the Commonwealth, with the exception that, the absolute number is higher for the former than the latter. However, it is encouraging to see that the percentage of women academics in Malaysia (24.8 %) during that year was slightly above the average for Commonwealth countries (22.6 %), and about equal to that in the United Kingdom (24.0 %). Table 3 further explains the gender proportion of professors in selected Commonwealth countries, in 2000. Overall, 13.1 % of the professors were women, which yield to a ratio of men to women of 7:1. As for Malaysia, there was an upward trend in the number of women professors from 9.6 % in 1997 to 16.9 % in 2000, which was above the Commonwealth average of 13.1 %. Similarly in India, the figures increased from 10.5 to 18.0 %, in Hong Kong from 7.3 to 12.4 %, and in Singapore from none to 6.6 %. The significant improvement in the proportion of women professors is noted among Asian countries. This was significantly affected by the marked improvement in participation of women in education, and in various sectors of employment such as services, industries and manufacturing (Malaysia, 2006).

Table 2: Gender Proportion of Academics in Selected Commonwealth Countries, in 2000

Country	Men	%	Women	%	Total
Malaysia	1603	75.2	528	24.8	2131
Australia	12081	76.1	3787	23.9	15868
Canada	19196	77.4	5618	22.6	24814
Hong Kong	1034	80.8	245	19.2	1279
India	10155	76.8	3067	23.2	13222
New Zealand	2397	77.3	702	22.7	3099
Singapore	1766	82.8	367	17.2	2133
United Kingdom	30696	76.0	9701	24.0	40397
Commonwealth	96902	77.4	28310	22.6	125212

Source: Singh (2002), p.5.

Table 3: Distribution of Professors by Gender in Selected Commonwealth Countries, including Malaysia, 2000

Country	Women	%	Men	%	Total
Malaysia*	77	16.9	379	83.7	456
Australia	286	10.9	2345	89.1	2631
Canada	1570	14.5	9271	85.5	10841
Hong Kong	53	12.4	376	87.6	429
India	769	18.0	3504	82.0	4273
New Zealand	55	11.7	416	88.3	471
Singapore	11	6.6	156	93.4	167
United Kingdom	986	11.2	7856	88.8	8842
Commonwealth	4349	13.1	28892	86.9	33241

Source: Singh (2002), p. 32-33.

* The data were based on a survey in seven established universities, namely UKM, UPM, UNIMAS, UM, USM, UTM and IUI in 2000.

Figure 5 displays the numbers of academics, specifically lecturers and professors by gender in UPM, from 1980 to 2008. The difference in the absolute numbers and percentages for each gender, for these two academic rankings, is clear whereby throughout these years there have been more men academics than women, even though the former is seen to be slightly declining after 2005. However, this is in contrast with men and women professors where the ratio is constantly at 3: 1 throughout the three decades. Before 2005, there was a big difference in the number of men and women lecturers until they become about equal in 2005. One reason to explain this is the influx of women graduates in the early years of the millennium, some of whom chose to join public universities, including UPM, as their career choice. There is evidence that women professors in Malaysian public universities have occupied various decision-making positions (Ismail & Mohd Rasdi, 2006).

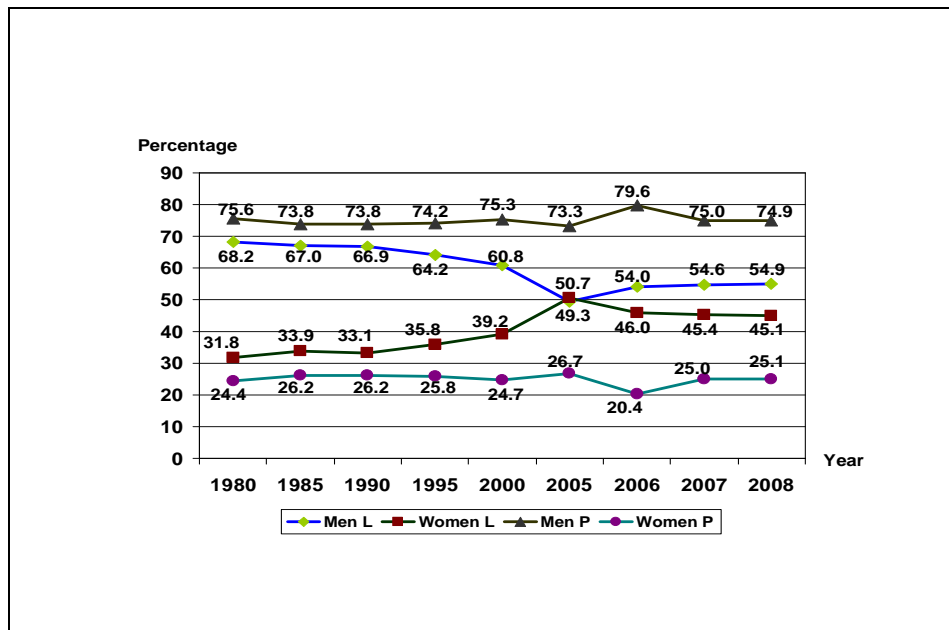


Figure 5: Lecturers and Professors by Gender at UPM, 1980 – 2008

Source: UPM (2008c).

Note: L = lecturer, P = professor

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CONCLUSIONS AND CHALLENGES

This article draws conclusion and identifies challenges as follows: First, there are more males than females in the economically active (15 to 65 years old) Malaysian population. It is, therefore, a challenge to us and the country to increase the number of male students at the tertiary education levels as well to improve the proportion of workforce with tertiary educated men. Second, the current ratio of male to female senior members in the sampled public university is still behind the national target of 2:1 (or 30 % women at the decision-making level) (Malaysia, 2006). This poses challenges to the institution concerned to arrive to this gender equity target. Not only is it a challenge to women to be accepted to decision-making posts and to shoulder the managerial careers as required e.g. to act as transformational leaders (that are found to be important in the globalized economy), but also to men to accept women as partners in the decision making ranks of the institution.

Third, there is mixed agreement in terms of the dichotomy of career definitions for men and women depending on contexts. While there are some truths about the non-steady, transitory or spiral stages of women's career paths (Driver, 1992) in practice most measurements of career growth and success are dependent on objective rather than the subjective standards (Evetts, 1996; Ismail, 2003) to which the former adheres to in the linear career pattern. Therefore, this leaves women with no choice but to conform to the objective and hierarchical career standards that are the norm in many organizations. However, this is only possible if women are aware of their other responsibilities in the domestic sphere as a wife and mother. This further concludes that a successful career woman is said to be one with a stable position in a profession and having a harmonious family. This certainly poses a challenge more to women and men.

Finally, understanding the differences in men's and women's career theories and status is important as both equally govern a proportion of the workforce in which education and effort have been invested. The university in this study cannot afford to underutilize or lose either gender's talents, more often women. This analysis of gender and career is, therefore, significant for any organizations to understand the ways in which men and women prepare, aspire and adjust in their future careers.

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