Female Student Involvement in Campus Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the challenges faced by female student leaders in Public Higher Educational Institutions (IPTA). All services and contributions of women begin in higher educational institutions and then move up to the professional level. However, issues arise in IPTA whereby female students are disqualified from leading societies in campus despite forming the majority voting power. The methodology used in this research is literature review and document analysis as a preliminary survey. Research outcome shows that efforts are made to place female students for leadership in societies in campus at IPTA. This recognition is very important to emphasize the importance of future leaders and professionals or human capital towards national progress without belittling the contribution of women in the current world.

Key words: Female students, involvement, campus, leadership.

Introduction

A Public Institution of Higher Learning (IPTA) is a place or platform which determines the academic success level of a student. Academic excellence shows the extent of mastery in a discipline studied. It is a very important issue among IPTA students because they will plunge into society and mobilize all aspects of life using the knowledge and expertise they have learnt in IPTA.

It is probably not extreme to say that the sustainability of national progress depends on tertiary students. On their shoulders rest a thousand and one duties and challenges of developing society in order to be competitive with other countries which are rapidly developing in various aspects of life as tertiary students will be the future leaders and professionals or what is termed the human capital which is so important for contribution to national progress and portrayed as the exemplary model of educated class in society. Thus, the mastery of knowledge acquired and its application in society, helps society to expand and develop, besides improving the standard and quality of life.

According to daily newspaper, Berita Harian (2010), admission of students into local IPTA in the year 2010 continues to be dominated by female students. Their number admitted far exceeds male students by a ratio of almost 2:1. Information from the Ministry of Higher Education shows that 61,750 or 58.6 percent out of 105,377 students who further their studies in IPTA for the academic session 2010/2011 are female students. At the university level in the year 2011, Minister of Higher Education, Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin, acknowledged that the male: female student ratio in several universities for session admission is 30:70 in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and 33:67 in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Although there are public universities which show male students exceeding female students, the difference is insignificant. For example, in Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHO) the male: female ratio is 55%:45%. This development shows that academic excellence of female students in terms of quantity and quality is something to be proud of.

Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Tun Abdul Razak stated in his speech on the 100th Women’s International Day in March 2011 that each year, local universities admit increasing numbers of female students in their campuses, whereas decades ago education was a luxury many women could not afford. The Ministry of Higher Education records a new female intake of 58.6 percent in local institutions of higher learning for the academic session. And in the 10th Malaysian Plan, the number of first class degree holders produced by these institutions in 2008 were mostly (62.3%) female. This trend shows that women who increasingly join the workforce in the coming years ahead equip themselves not just as productive workers, but also have the potential to lead in their respective fields. As expressed in the Malay saying, the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.
The statement that all services and contributions by women begin from institutions of higher learning and proceed to the professional level cannot be refuted by parties who belittle women’s contribution in the current world. However, issues arise in IPTA whereby female students are denied leadership of societies in campuses in spite of them holding majority voting power.

The Era of Female Student Leaders:

An earlier study entitled “Gender and leadership among female students in public universities” was conducted regarding female student leadership of societies in Universiti Malaya. Out of 25 societies analysed, only one society had elected female students as its president. Most female students (21 societies) were found to be appointed as deputy or president (2 persons) and also as Secretary (even though in societies traditionally monopolised by males such as engineering and accounting). Despite having a majority of female members, these societies were still inclined to elect male students as leaders. Most female students were elected as Committee Members or EXCO. Of the 25 societies, 23 had female exceeding male committee members (Hassan and Silong, 2006).

Leaders: Capability and Willingness:

Research outcome shows that the majority of female students who hold leadership positions state that they are unsure whether they were qualified to lead. Some also state that they are forced to accept nomination because there are no other takers for the positions. What is certain is that on appointment they feel responsible and carry out their tasks as best as they can. According to some female students, female students who hold the role of leaders usually are very committed to their tasks. They are also very diligent and disciplined. And according to a senior officer of the Student Affairs Division who deal with student leaders, female students fare better in terms of skills and efficiency. Even though a President of a society may be a male student, the ones who usually go forward are the female students who are probably only ordinary exco members (Hassan and Silong, 2006). Generally, female students who are elected have the same characteristics, which are as follows (Sidin, 2000):

1. Possess a high level of confidence.
2. Able to articulate their ideas well.
3. Feel care and concern for current issues.
4. Have a positive attitude.
5. Regard a problem as a challenge which can be dealt with.

Factor of Participation in Societies and Appointment as Leader:

Female students involved as ordinary committee members are usually interested to be active in societies. This interest begins at primary school level, moreover, most of them are strong encouraged by their parents. Thus, seniors find it easier to invite them to take an active part in societies. Another reason for their active participation in societies is to gain new knowledge, leadership training, belonging to an organisation and time management, knowledge which cannot be acquired in the lecture room. Through the society, they get to apply in the real world what they studied in the lecture room. For example, as a leader, they get to influence others to do something as planned. There are also participants who state that they are more inclined to be a committee member for the sake of adding value to their resume. According to one of the participants, “being involved in a society helps to avoid feeling bored, empty and homesick for the family at my hometown”. The conclusion here is that capability and readiness of female students to hold leadership positions are not in doubt. Most of them are ready to develop themselves to the highest level in Maslow’s hierarchy.

Constraints to Leadership:

The problems which arise may be divided into several themes as follows:

1. Dealing with students and older people whereby interaction with male students requires taking care of their ego to avoid adverse effects. Most males do not like to take instructions from females in their role as leaders. In addition, there are male students who assume that females are soft, so they need not take them seriously or heed their instructions, criticism or tasks given. According to female students, only male students with self-confidence and self-discipline are capable of working comfortably with female student leaders. In many situations as leaders, female students do not communicate more assertively to achieve a win-win situation.
2. In showing their real potential as leaders, female students always come into conflict within themselves on the most suitable behaviour. The issue which frequently lingers in their minds is “what would male students say when females like to give instructions or act dominantly?” The anxiety of being labelled as alpha female,
which may affect their chances of getting a future life partner causes some among them with potential not to or fear to show their true potential as leaders.

3. A female student holding post of President says that the major challenge for her is dealing with jealousy, envy, uncooperativeness and being constantly under suspicion. Her academic success is frequently associated with her close association with lecturers as President. She is also labelled as being overly ambitious. According to her, this situation heavily stresses her so much so that she feels marginalised. She does not think she would become a student leader again in the future. Another challenge for her is to convince other female students that her intention to help other female students is sincere and that they should assist her.

4. Other challenges stated are the difficulty to get members to participate in activities, to get new members as many students do not want to be involved in the society and the lack of time caused by academic demands.

**Obstacles within the Society as Highest Leader:**

It is not denied that many female students though appointed as Deputy President, Vice-President and executive committee member, actually function as workers or implementers to instructions or decisions made by the highest leader. Their impact as leaders is not obvious. Even though they hold voting power to elect female leaders, yet they do not do so. Almost all students interviewed state that women qualify and are competent to be the highest leader in the society, but it is difficult to implement at present. Among the causes for this statement are:

1. Appointing male students as leaders is an established tradition which must be continued. Organisational culture is difficult to change.

2. Religious-based values influence socialization and shape the thinking that men are leaders. Female students feel that the right thing to do is to elect male students as leaders. “Women will elect men leaders, moreover there is a shortage of men in the faculty”. Female students believed to be more liberal and more willing to accept female leaders are urban students who seldom get involved with the societies.

3. Female students themselves do not support female leaders. On the contrary they put unfair pressure on them such as ignoring or marginalizing them, gossiping about them and so on. This attitude is consistent with the concept of horizontal violence which lately is an obstacle faced by female leaders. This concept is borrowed from Paulo Freire who explores the effect of oppression on the minority (women in a male-dominated society can be considered as a minority). Disappointment and anger are released on friends who are equally oppressed.

**Recommendations:**

Among the steps which can be taken to increase the number of female student leaders is by holding the following programs:

1. Awareness and sensitization programs on how an organisation culture is created, structured and maintained, and how power is used to shape values and behaviour, particularly relating to gender.

2. Program to give an understanding relating to organisational politics, the effect and its role.

3. Develop leadership strategies and skills to ensure they are able to be effective leaders in a given organisational culture.

4. Understand and use a leadership style suitable for the socialization process undergone by women from various available options of leadership styles.

5. Develop strategies and skills to influence and change the existing culture.

6. Provide self-development training such as follows:
   i. How to be an assertive person – ways women communicate (including conveying ideas) are usually interpreted as not firm or unsure. This kind of training will help women to empower themselves, maintain and strengthen their personal power in an organisation.

   ii. Leadership/ management courses for women – other than courses relating to time management, negotiation, stress management, decision-making, budgeting, motivation and so on, topics such as power including organisational politics, organisational culture and self-presentation also need to be given attention.

   iii. ICT and implications for women – skills in this field will give a positive image suitable with current developments which require speedy information exchange and sharing.

   iv. Life planning and career development – this topic is very important to help women understand and deal with conflicting needs in dual-career of women (job and family).

**Conclusion:**

The main purpose of this article is to survey the current situation concerning female student involvement as leaders of societies in campus. The number appointed as the highest leaders in organisations is too few. For
those appointed as Deputy President or Vice-President and as executive committee members, they function more as workers or implementers. Research data support previous research findings.

However, the explanation on the obstacles differs a little from previous research. Female students involved are interested and have high self-confidence to be leaders. The biggest restraining factor is the organisational culture (society). Their decision to elect is still very much influenced by tradition even though the power to change the situation lies in their hands.

The most interesting finding of this research is the factor of horizontal violence which had never before been raised. This factor may have a long-term effect if ignored. It is also sad that in order to succeed a female student has to face challenges caused not just by male students but also by female students who should be more supportive of their own gender. This matter should be given due attention in future researches.

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References

Berita Harian, 2011. 18 March.