

# The Leadership Styles of Women Policy-Makers

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**Abstract** – As women increasingly contribute to leadership roles that traditionally been occupied mainly by men, the possibility that the leadership style of women differ from the one of men. The differences can, in large part, be attributed to the way families socialize girls and boys. Even though some attitudes around gender roles are declining, the vestiges remain strong enough to affect people's perceptions, besides its impact on women leadership style. This qualitative paper has prioritizes on leadership style of women policy-makers. The aim is to gain more understanding about female leadership style as a socially constructed phenomenon at organizational level. Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews. Participants interviewed included nine women leaders in the public and private sector who were either teachers/lecturers, or administrators in the education industry. From the data analysis, it was concluded that women use more autocratic and democratic approaches more than delegating and bureaucratic approaches. This study can provide insight into the landscape of women's leadership roles and how to support these leaders. **Copyright © 2016 Penerbit Akademia Baru - All rights reserved.**

**Keywords:** Leadership, Women Leader, Leadership Style

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Societal conventions regarding gender and leadership traditionally exclude women, because top leadership is viewed as a masculine domain. But now women are making inroads to gain leadership positions, which are going against the tides of cultural construction of leadership [1,2]. According to Kiamba [1], although the number of female leaders has increased, there is still a belief that the male plays better leadership role than women. In concurrence with this a recent study by Abdul Ghani Azmi, et al [3] revealed that women at the top management in Malaysia have increased to 32.3 percent. Meanwhile, women at the decision-making level in Malaysian public sector are only 20 percent from the overall workforce. The government of Malaysia recognizes the role of women leaders, in 10th Malaysian Plan Report, that women should be provided with opportunities and environment mindset to enable them to get involved actively in the national development process. This reflects Malaysia's government puts serious effort to enhance numbers of women's involvement in the decision making level [3].

Before one can fully talk about the contemporary thinking on gender differences in leadership, it is helpful to review, at least briefly, the meaning of leadership and leadership style. The leadership as defined by Gardner [4] is "the ability to influence the behavior, thoughts, and actions of a significant number of individuals". A comprehensive definition of leadership is that of a process in which an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common

goal [5]. Though these definitions look simple the concept is least understood and in itself involves much more. According to Gardner [4], “The greatest challenge the leaders face is to bring about significant and lasting changes in a large and heterogeneous group”. Leadership style is by definition leadership behavior with two clearly independent dimensions: the task dimension that includes goal setting, organization, direction, and control; and the relationship dimension involving support, communication, interaction, and active listening [6]. A precise definition of the perfect or ideal leadership style would be useless considering the numerous factors that might shape such a style [7].

The growing presence of women in the international workforce continues to motivate research on the leadership styles of women, particularly to determine if women have their own ways of leading [7]. Intuitive reasoning suggests that early socialization patterns develop different qualities in women and men that would likely result in variations in leadership styles[8]. The real issue in leadership differences lies in the equity in selecting the right person with the appropriate skills and qualities to ensure the effectiveness and success of the organization[9]. The integration of women in leadership roles is not a matter of “fitting in” the traditional models, but “giving in” to the opportunities for them to practice their own leadership styles.

There are several types of leadership one of the styles is autocratic style as “a leaders who tended to centralize authority, dictate work methods, make unilateral decisions, and limit employee participation”, the democratic style as “a leader who tended to involve employees in decision making, designate authority, encourage participation in deciding work methods and goals, and use feedback as an opportunity for coaching employees” and the laissez-faire style as “a leaders who generally gave the group complete freedom to make decisions and complete the work in whatever way it saw fit,”[10].

Similarly, Wetherell [11] stated there are three common leadership styles in the field of education included authoritarian, participative and delegative. Using the authoritarian style, a leader specifically tells teachers what to do and how to do it. A participative style leader involves teacher in making decisions on what needs to be done, and how to do it. A delegative style leader allows the teachers to make the decisions. A good leader however uses all three styles based on the situation and the teachers involved. Furthermore, many research indicated that compared to male leaders, women are more collaborative, participative and democratic in their leadership styles and approaches [12,13].

## **2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

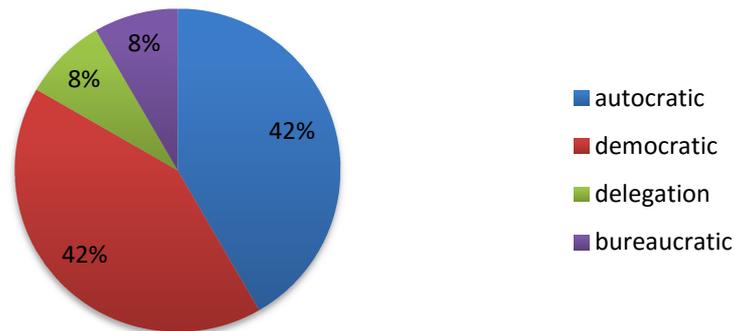
The study is purely based on a qualitative method that measures women leadership style within the education industry in Malaysia. The participants were nine women leaders from different backgrounds of education organization who were responsible in significant leadership positions in their education organizations in Malaysia. Data were gathered through open-ended qualitative interviews with all participants. Subsequently, based on the findings, the researcher was able to explain the particular leadership styles of Malay women in the education industry in Malaysia.

## **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section discusses the key findings from the research with a focus on leadership style involved. The nine participants views were analyzed and the results were highlighted accordingly.

### 3.1 Leadership Style

Each of the women leaders had their own individualistic perspective about being a good leader. From a very classical autocratic approach to a very creative, bureaucratic approach were been identified by the respondents. It was also revealed that the respondents had read books on leadership styles, to assist them with their roles as organizational leaders.



**Figure 1:** Leadership Style

The above figure shows the leadership style been mentioned by respondents during the interview. The leadership styles include autocratic, democratic, situational, delegating, participative, and bureaucratic approach. The highest leadership styles been rated by leaders were autocratic and democratic which rated 42% of the total approaches listed. While, delegation and bureaucratic approaches were the lowest leadership styles been voted with both 8%.

### 4.0 CONCLUSION

Interestingly it was noted that the highest leadership styles been rated by leaders of this research (teachers, lecturers and administrators in the academic industry) were autocratic and democratic. These two styles are very important and well used in academic industries; the democratic approach is often considered “better”, while the autocratic approach is best applied when organizations need to be turned around quickly. To be more specific, researchers detailed up the four types of leadership styles used in this research.

**Autocratic Leadership Style** is said to stress obedience, loyalty, strict adherence to roles [14-16]. The leaders who espouse this leadership style make and enforce the rules. In other words, they ensure that the decisions made are carried out. One of the benefits of autocratic leadership is their ability to develop reliable and devoted followers as well as act as the principal authority in establishing and maintaining order [14,16]. To achieve their purpose autocratic leaders utilize centralized decision making process without cognizant of the opinions of the followers [16].

Many people are drawn to, respect and gladly follow an autocrat – someone who possesses power and does not hesitate to use it to achieve goals. During the interview sessions, researchers uncovered several examples of autocratic instructional leaders who exerted enough positive inspirations on their staff to improve standardized achievements among them even with students. Five of the nine women adopted the autocratic style where necessary. However it was noted that the autocratic style was more instructional and interspersed with doses of consensus building.

***In Democratic Style Of Leadership***, the leader is more participatory as members of organizations are given the opportunity to air their opinions or perceptions [17]. A democratic leader is therefore said to offer guidance to the followers as the leader allows them to participate in decision-making process [18]. The leader is also said to be disposed of making the followers to believe that they are important parts of the decision-making process. This psychology helps to foster employees' commitment to the objectives of the organization or group [14]. Additionally, the leader is said to be considerate, consultative, participative and employee-centered. The leader is concerned about the maintenance of good working relations; the leaders are supportive and move toward facilitating interaction, good personal relationship and group decision-making process [14]. Thus the women leaders of this research described their leadership approaches and behaviors with varying examples from their experiences. As: willing to listen to other voices, love to discuss with colleagues, and relying more frequently on visionary styles where visionary is a synthesis of democratic approach.

***In Delegating Leadership Style***, the leader transfers authority to a competent follower to perform some of his/ her duties in selected situations. As the leader remains answerable for the result of the work delegated [16]. Due to the complexity of the position, leaders cannot perform all their functions without utilizing the principles of delegation in decision-making and problem-solving process [19]. Delegation of authority is good for the leader as well as the follower; it enables the leader to help others (followers) to grow, develop their leadership skills, and work towards achieving the objectives of their organizations. In this research, several women leaders mentioned of being a delegative approach leader. As a whole the women leaders interviewed agreed that they tended to delegate work to their department heads and section heads. However they kept a close eye on the situations and would interfere should there be a need.

***Bureaucratic Style Of Leadership*** is somewhat related to the autocratic style of leadership. However, bureaucratic leader's decision-making process hinges on organizational policies, rules, and procedures established by the top-level administrative officers in organizations [14]. They are inflexible as the leader follows what is in the book when making decisions with little or no in-puts from the followers who are expected to obey the orders [16]. And in this research, the bureaucratic leaders are generally prioritized according to established rules and regulations, some of which can inhibit innovation. Therefore, the respondents felt that bureaucratic leadership style assisted them in getting the work done the right way and on time. While agreeing that being bureaucratic could inhibit creativity and innovation, these women leaders advocated a bureaucratic style, which did not stifle innovation and creativity.

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