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TOO EMOTIONAL TO LEAD? GENDER-BASED LEADERSHIP STEREOTYPES AND THE ROAD TO SDG 5 IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This paper explores the limitations of stereotypes associating emotionality with feminine weakness on the progress of women as leaders in Malaysia and how they hinder the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) targets. Although 38.2% of the labor force consists of women (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), they are still underrepresented in the senior management (24.7%), as well as corporate boards (17.9%) (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021). The cultural and organizational mismatch to favour women is the stereotype of women being too emotional to lead in office which strengthens the masculine conception of leadership as based on rationality and control. This study surveyed 300 Malaysian professionals and interviewed 20 managers using a mixed-method approach to investigate the perception of both emotionality and leadership suitability. Quantitative results indicate a widespread notion that women are more emotional (71%) and less leadership qualified (57%) and qualitative results reveal how cultural norms, organizational bias and internalized self-censorship impede it. They create a twofold bind: women are punished because they show emotions, but they are also criticized because of their inability to show this. One of the most ironic aspects is the fact that most of the respondents who ranked emotional intelligence as a valuable quality in leadership are 74 percent, demonstrating a basic inconsistency. This paper holds the view that these stereotypes need to be tackled in order to realize SDG 5 goals on ending discrimination and getting more women involved in decision-making. It offers multi-level interventions: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training, mentorship initiatives, gender-responsive policies, building board quotas and changing early education. Such approaches would repackage

emotionality as a leadership strength and promote gender-inclusive growth in the multicultural Malaysia.

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Keyword:

Emotional Intelligence, Gender Equality, Gender Stereotypes, Leadership Barriers, Malaysia, SDG 5, Sustainable Development, Women in Leadership



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Introduction

SDG 5 (United Nations) is the goal of the United Nations, which is to achieve gender equality and empower women and girls by 2030 and to strive to eliminate discrimination, equal distribution of leadership and supportive policies. Gender stereotypes are so much embedded in Malaysia, a country of rich and diverse mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian, indigenous cultures that are shaped by the Islamic and Confucian principles, which is an obstacle in the development of SDG 5. One of the most common stereotypes is that women are considered too emotional to be leaders, and that such a masculine understanding of leadership revolves around rationality, assertiveness, and decisiveness, whereas emotionality is something related to femininity and is viewed as a weakness in leadership (Solo, 2024). The study is an empirical study of the impact of this emotionality stereotype on the leadership development of women and Malaysian development towards SDG 5 goals.

Malaysia has taken some progressive strides in the field of education and involvement of women in the workforce; as of 2022, 38.2 percent of the workforce is represented by women (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). They are, however, not well represented in leadership, comprising 24.7 percent in senior management, and 17.9 percent in corporate boards (Securities Commission Malaysia, 2021). This gap is an expression of structural inequality based on the cultural norms of prioritizing the roles of women at home rather than having careers, which is supported by patriarchy and collectivism (Hecker, 2024). The same emotional display by women and men is perceived differently with women being considered unprofessional and men being perceived as authoritative which forms a gendered two-sided standard (O'Connor, 2024).

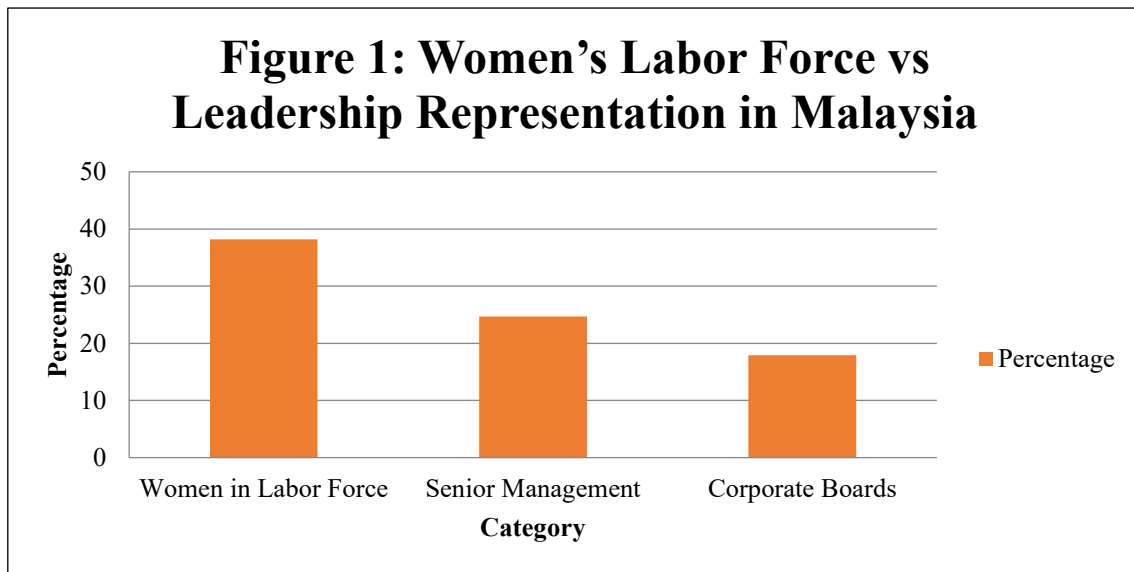


Figure 1. Women's Labor Force Participation Compared to Leadership Representation in Malaysia.

Source: Authors' analysis based on Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022) and Securities Commission Malaysia (2021).

Such gendered interpretation undermines the goals of SDG 5, in particular, Target 5.1 (ending discrimination) and Target 5.5 (enabling women full participation in leadership). The government's 30-percent quota of women in corporate boards by 2020 was not met in the Malaysian government, which demonstrates structural and cultural barriers. The present paper answers the following question: What is the role of gender-based emotionality stereotypes on the further development of women in leadership roles and SDG 5 achievement in Malaysia? The study will combine quantitative questionnaires of 300 professionals in Malaysia with 20 semi-structured interviews to assess the attitude towards emotionality and leadership. In the study, cultural, organizational, and internalized barriers are identified, and measures are suggested to encourage gender-equitable leadership in accordance with the SDG 5-based commitments of Malaysia and in accordance with global objectives of gender equality.

There are three contributions to this research. First, it has the first mixed-method evidence that specifically looks at emotionality stereotypes in the multicultural setting of Malaysia that brings together 300 professionals and 20 managers in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Johor Bahru. Although past studies reported overall gender hindrance in Malaysia, none of them single out emotionality as a specific process that curtails the progress of women (Sung, 2022; Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). Second, it also reframes emotionality as perceived weakness into leadership strength by revealing a crisis paradox: 74% of the participants consider emotional intelligence an asset to leadership, and 57% of participants believe that women are less suitable as leaders. This shows that there is a gender interpretation barrier and not emotion. Third, it also bridges a direct connection between emotionality stereotypes and SDG 5 implementation, which provides evidence-based interventions with a multi-level connection between cultural change and the Malaysian sustainable development model.

Literature Review

The literature studies aim at discussing the concepts and relationship between gendered stereotypes in leadership. This focuses on the stereotypes projected to females in organizations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper relies on three proven theories to expound on the process through which emotionality stereotypes conveniently lock women out as leaders. Role Congruity Theory assumes that women are prejudiced when their communal qualities (empathy, warmth) contradict agentic leadership qualities (decisiveness, control), which is what Role Congruity Theory suggests (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The expression of women in professional situations by showing emotions confirms the stereotypes of the community, forming an image of incompatibility with the demands of leadership. The application of Double Bind Theory (Jamieson, 1995) presents women with punishment on both sides of showing emotion (taken as a sign of weakness) and not showing emotion (taken as a sign of coldness). It is an unrealistic expectation of a woman not to express her feelings as this is seen as being weak and unfit to hold the leadership position and being quiet-hearted or inauthentic (both of which hurt the credibility of leaders) is also damaging. Gendered Organizations Theory (Acker, 1990) demonstrates the way in which the organization structures, processes and cultures give privilege to masculine norm of rationality and systematically undervalue the femininity associated qualities, such as emotional intelligence. These gendered organizational norms and cultural collectivism together with Islamic traditions of focusing on the domestic status of women and Confucian gender hierarchical expectations collide to form compounded barriers in the context of Malaysia. Combined, these frameworks clarify the role of emotionality stereotypes as conceptualization of exclusion processes that create women as inherently inappropriate to be leaders at the same time portraying emotional competencies (empathy, communication, relationship-building) as critical leadership requirements in the contemporary transformational leadership (Robinson, 2025; Vijai, 2025). Such a theoretical framework makes emotionality stereotypes be not personal prejudices but systemic obstacles literally standing in the way of the SDG 5 Target 5.5 goal of guaranteeing the full inclusion of women in the sphere of leadership and decision-making.

Gender Stereotypes and Leadership

Gender stereotypes classify qualities as masculine (e.g. assertiveness, independence, competitiveness) or feminine (e.g. empathy, nurturing, emotionality) and leadership functions historically fit into masculine category (Zeala, 2024). The lack of fit model that was suggested by Robinson (2025) is based on the assumption that female people are viewed as inappropriate in leadership because the feminine stereotypes and the expectations of a leader of being decisive and in control do not fit that stereotype. According to the role congruity theory, bias against female leaders occurs when gender role expectations at the collective level are inconsistent with agentic leadership norms that are linked to power (Xiu, 2025). This incompatibility leads to biased evaluations where women have a very small range of behaviors to be accepted as competent and in most cases, people would have to adapt masculine qualities. In Malaysia such incongruity is exaggerated by the cultural factors. The Malay, Chinese, and Indian cultures embrace collectivism, in which group harmony and gender roles are upheld, with women being caregivers and men, breadwinners (Von Wong, 2023). Islamic interpretations which shape the Malaysian social context tend to support the domesticity of the

women and limit their ambitions to leadership roles (Irawan et al. 2024). The Confucian doctrines uphold the hierarchical relationships of gender with the man being a natural leader. Through these cultural pressures, women are motivated to choose family over the career considering leadership as an impossibility or something that is socially unacceptable. In addition, there is internalization of gender stereotypes leading to self-deprecating behaviors. According to Mohiuddin (2024), stereotype threat is a situation when women internalize bias in society and become less confident and willing to lead. This is evident in Malaysia whereby women do not discuss promotions or establish their authority to prevent breaking the expectations of femininity (Suleman et al. 2021). These are internal inhibitors coupled with external prejudices creating a glass ceiling that limits women involvement in leadership that hinders the SDG 5 Target 5.5 goal of equal representation in decision-making.

Emotionality and Leadership Perceptions

The stereotype of women being too emotional to lead is founded on the norms of gender display: women have to be warm whereas men have to be cold (Chalmers, 2021). In leadership, emotionality is usually synonymous with irrationality or weakness, which is especially more scrutinized against women since they face pressure more when displaying emotions such as anger, sadness, or passion (Roy, 2022). According to the research, Block et al. (2022) found that angry women leaders were seen as incompetent relative to men whose anger is a sign of power or authority (Goleman, 1995). This gives a two-sided predicament in which women are required to suppress feelings and display professionalism, but by doing so, they result in being seen as cold-hearted - which is a transgression to the femininity rules that emphasize on being warm and understanding. Ironically, emotional intelligence that entails empathy, relationship-building and self-awareness is currently being recognized as essential in successful leadership. Feminine communal features are more related to transformational leadership founded on inspiring communication, cooperation, and emotional connection (Robinson, 2025). With the help of meta-analysis, women prove to be more successful in transformational leadership with the help of emotional intelligence, increased group cohesiveness, innovation, and employee welfare (Vijai, 2025). However, the stereotype of emotionality as a feminine weakness clouds these merits, making a difference between the leadership success of women and their representation within an organization. The cultural tendency toward emotional reserve in Malaysian workplaces reinforces attitudes toward the emotionality of women in the workplace. A woman who shows passion in a boardroom can be considered as emotional, but the same actions on a man can be considered as decisive leadership (Sodhi, 2021). This is aggravated in the collectivist society of Malaysia where harmony is appreciated, and disruption is negatively perceived especially where women express feelings. The irony is very clear: even though emotional intelligence is one of the aspects that are appreciated in contemporary leadership models, its connection to femininity makes women less credible and, thus, restricts their progress.

SDG 5 and Malaysia's Context

Target 5.1 of SDG 5 requires the removal of gender-based discrimination, Target 5.5 advocates the full participation of women in leadership and decision-making and Target 5.c implements policies that are gender-equalizing. Malaysia has been improving on the share of women in labor force, with women constituting 38.2 percent in 2022 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022). However, the representation of female leaders is still low: in 2021, 24.7 percent of top management and 17.9 percent of corporate boards were occupied by women (Securities

Commission Malaysia, 2021). By 2020, the government had set a goal of 30 percent of women on corporate boards, but this was not met, showing structural barriers. These differences are largely contributed by the cultural norms.

The collectivistic culture based on the Islamic, Confucian, and patriarchal principles in Malaysia supports traditional gender roles when women are expected to be nurturers, and men are supposed to be authorities (Abdullah et al., 2016). These norms overlap with the organizational practices, such as prejudiced hiring and promotion criteria, which favour men who are viewed as reasonable or aggressive (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). The women are not usually considered in the jobs where strategic thinking or toughness is needed, even though they have shown them (Davis, 2025). There are also no opportunities of women to access leadership via male networks and mentorship is also lacking (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). These trends reflect those of collectivist societies in the world, especially in South Asia whereby cultural demands uphold leading roles of women as being domestic rather than as leaders (Saeed et al., 2022). However, other areas such as hospitality demonstrate that androgynous leadership that integrates masculine and feminine traits to enhance organizational performance is a superior model (Xiong et al., 2022). Managing the stereotypes of emotionality is crucial to SDG 5 achievement as women are efficient as leaders of inclusive and sustainable developments (UNWTO, 2019). Multicultural situation in Malaysia implies certain interventions which should take into consideration local traditions and promote international gender equality objectives.

Empirical Evidence and Methodology

Malaysian empirical research affirms the limitation of culture and stereotypes on women leadership. The study by Sung (2022) demonstrates that the glass ceiling does not allow women to obtain senior jobs because of cultural values which make families their priorities. The perception in the work place has been formed by the interpretation of the Islamic norms to focus more on the role of women in the home (Antasari, 2021). These barriers are supported by organizational biases, such as male dominated networks, lack of mentorship, etc. (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). In this research, a mixed methodology was used in order to investigate emotionality stereotypes. The 300 professionals (150 men, 150 women) purposely sampled across the various industries in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Bahru came up with quantitative data (300 professionals) aged 25 to 55 years. The industry section covered finance (35%), education (25%), healthcare (20%), manufacturing (15%) and technology (5%), occupying middle to top management roles. The questionnaire included 30 items that were Likert-scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) and were modified versions of validated scales. The instrument was culturally refined after the pilot testing involving 30 professionals. SPSS 26.0 was used to analyze the data: correlation analysis, independent sample t-tests, and chi-square. Twenty semi-structured in-person interviews (10 men, 10 women in managerial positions) were conducted to understand how emotional expression is perceived, how gender-based double standards are experienced, how culture mediates the process, and what SDG 5 barriers exist. The interviews were carried out in English and Malay, and were 45-60 minutes, after which they were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through the six-stage thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). The work received an ethical approval [University Ethics Committee], amount of approval [XXXX]. Each participant signed a written informed consent; the issue of confidentiality was ensured by using anonymous code. The numbers were quantitative and showed that 71 per cent respondents thought that women were more emotive and 57 per cent respondents thought that women were less suited to leadership ($r = -0.39$, $p <$

0.01). Ironically, 74 percent placed emotional intelligence as a value in leadership and this is a contradiction. The themes identified as qualitative were cultural reinforcement of stereotypes, organizational prejudices towards men, and self-censorship internalized to women, hindering SDG 5.

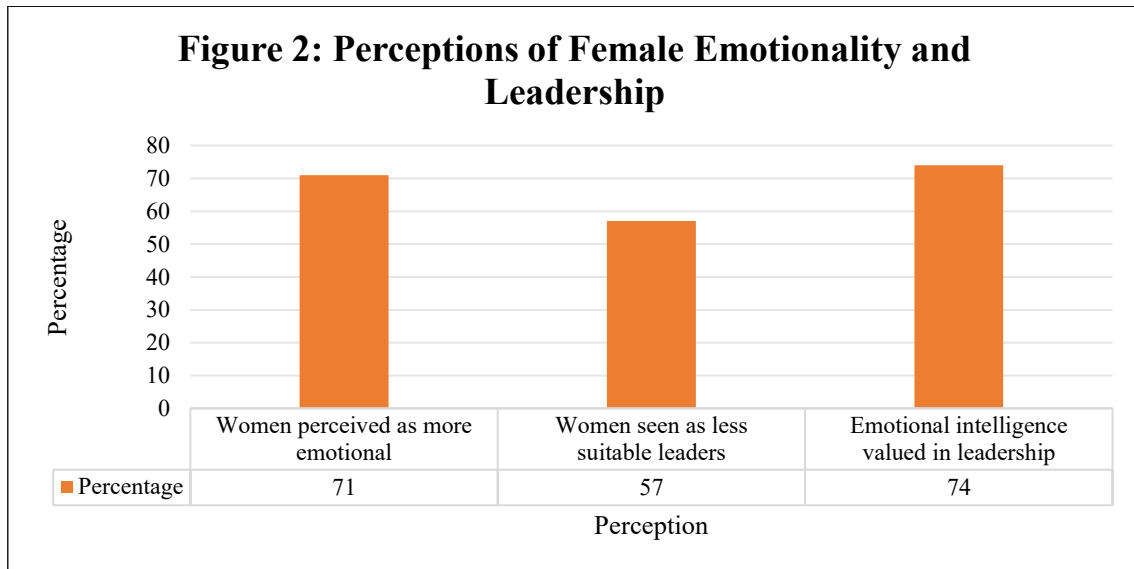


Figure 2: Perceptions of Female Emotionality and Leadership

Source: Primary data analysis (2024).

Strategies to Address Stereotypes

Gender-based stereotypes, especially that women are too emotional to be leaders, should be overcome at multi-levels. Discovery of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training in both governmental and non-governmental institutions should clearly redefine emotionality as emotional intelligence, which is a highly needed leadership skill that is synonymous with transformational leadership (Tabassum and Nayak, 2021). Organizations are required to cherish empathy, communication and cooperation instead of rejecting emotional expressiveness. The performance evaluation systems should be audited to rid them of gendered language that punishes women on the basis of what is rewarded in male counterparts. Mentorship programs need to normalize female authority since women hold back emotions to escape punishment. Access to influential networks makes women to be represented in decision-making situations through sponsors (Thelma and Ngulube, 2024). Patriarchal assumptions need to be confronted by involving male allies (Guthridge et al., 2022). The voluntary 30 percent quota of board of Malaysia has not worked. The government should introduce obligatory quotas and transparency criteria and certain sanctions in the case of non-observance (UNWTO, 2019).

The positive experience of Norway with the quota system proves that gender-balanced leadership teams help to improve the performance of the organization (Seierstad et al., 2023). The campaigns in the media need to break the dichotomy between masculinity and rationality as well as femininity and emotionality by profiling successful women leaders in Malaysia who make use of emotional intelligence. The gender-based curriculum should be introduced in primary and secondary education, where emotional intelligence is being a universal leadership skill taught. Schools and universities need to re-set expectations because from leadership

perceptions are formed early in students. Deep rooted stereotyping can be averted through gender-sensitive curricula training, student leadership training, and teacher training. The hospitality industry in Malaysia can consider androgynous forms of leadership that can be embraced in the country and involve agentic (assertive) and communal (nurturing) leadership traits to achieve effective leadership (Xiong et al., 2022). However, interventions should be culturally conscious of the local customs and proceed to SDG 5s global gender equality vision.

Conclusion

This paper shows that the stereotype that women are too emotional to be leaders reflects a negative blow on their leadership journey and SDG 5 development in Malaysia. The negative relationship between perceived emotionality and the suitability of women as leaders was confirmed by quantitative data and indicative of cultural norms, organizational biases and internalized stereotypes as the most important barricades was uncovered by qualitative data. Importantly, emotional intelligence is greatly appreciated (74%), but women are trapped in a catch between being criticized when emotional and being blamed when they control their emotion- a norm that is not equally applied to men. Malaysia has to adopt diversity training, mentoring, and policies such as the 30% quota on boards in order to meet SDG 5. The perspective can be changed by reframing emotionality as leadership asset, being inspired by androgynous models. Future studies are suggested to consider rural attitudes and longitudinal interventions, even though it was limited to urban areas and self-reporting may cause bias. These stereotypes are important to confront in order to achieve gender equality and inclusive development.

The alternative solution to the long-term amelioration is the education systems where boys and girls are hastened to enhance their emotional intelligence and leadership qualities that lack gender connotations. The most important spheres that should be reestablished to establish expectations are schools and universities where students shape the vision of the leaders at an early age. This virtue can be compromised with the introduction of gender-sensitive training into the curricula, student leadership courses and teacher development courses before the stereotypes are firmly entrenched. The label around the issue of women being over-emotional is much less plausible when the emotionality is extended to the young people as a universal force. This could help the leaders in the future to be more inclusion conscious and to be able to introduce the social change in the long run by such early interventions, and the more so when these learning environments actively demand the outdated norms to be challenged and introduce the different models of successful leadership to reflect the reality of the world.

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Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. Ethical clearance was obtained through the researcher's faculty and supervisory review process at UCYP University prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

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