

# CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND JOB PERFORMANCE OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SABAH, MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between career advancement and job performance among women in Sabah, Malaysia, focusing on the mediating role of education. Despite the growing emphasis on gender equity in the workplace, women continued to face significant obstacles in career progression, particularly in less developed states like Sabah, where cultural, familial, and psychological factors intersect with professional aspirations. Using a quantitative research method, data were collected from a sample of 390 women employed in both the public and private sectors in Sabah to examine the influence of key factors, including work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success, on job performance. The findings revealed that both work-life balance and family responsibilities played a critical role in shaping job performance. At the same time, fear of success acted as a psychological barrier that prevented women from reaching their full career potential. Education, as a mediating factor, significantly enhanced job performance and career advancement opportunities by equipping women with the necessary skills and confidence to overcome societal and psychological barriers. The study suggested that workplace policies and educational initiatives tailored to these factors can substantially promote gender equity and improve women's professional outcomes in Sabah.

**Keywords:** career advancement, work-life balance, family responsibilities, fear of success, job performance, education.

## INTRODUCTION

In various sectors, career advancement remains a pivotal factor in shaping the job performance of employees. In particular, women's career progression has garnered increasing attention due to its direct influence on organisational success and workforce diversity (Ackah & Heaton, 2003; Alfa & Newaz, 2008). The concept of career advancement, defined as an individual's progression from lower to higher positions, involves skill development and knowledge acquisition, enhancing one's capacity to manage complex roles (Apthioman & Pramono, 2020). However, despite these advancements, the research indicated that women, particularly in state like Sabah, face significant barriers in achieving higher management positions (Barnett, 1991).

The current study focused on exploring the relationship between career advancement, measured by three indicators — work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success—and job performance, with education served as a mediating factor (*Figure 1*). In Malaysia, women are highly involved at the tertiary level as academics, researchers and in leadership, including in STEM courses (Jamil et al., 2019). In this regard, 34% of Malaysian women are employed by small firms, 35% are working in medium-sized firms, and 35% are employed by large firms (Amin & Zakra, 2019). Malaysian universities have been experiencing a rise in female enrollment since 2000 (Jin et al., 2022), contributing to increased female workforce participation and higher levels of professionalism (Sulaiman et al., 2015). Subsequently, the Malaysian government has recognised women as valuable contributors to the economy. It actively supports their involvement in male-dominated industries (Amin et al., 2023), notably, women's active contributions in Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI), including breakthroughs in cancer research specific to Asian women and advancements in stem cell technology (Shaari et al., 2024). Other studies have emphasised that women in higher education in Malaysia, not only contribute to institutional missions but also empower others (Marmo et al., 2024). Furthermore, some women pursue advanced education as means of gaining both empowerment and professional growth (Marmo et al., 2024). On the other hand, the mediating role of education has not been specifically studied among women employees.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The study aimed to determine the mediating role of education amid career advancement and job performance. The specific research objectives were as follows:

- a. To determine the relationship between career advancement (work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success) and job performance among women in Sabah
- b. To analyse the mediating effect of education on the relationship between career advancement and job performance among women in Sabah.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Career advancement (Work-life balance) and job performance*

Previous studies have mentioned the benefits of work-life balance on employee job performance. Dousin et al. (2019) found that flexible working hours significantly enhance job performance and employee productivity among doctors and nurses in East Malaysia. In this light, flexibility to manage work and personal-related tasks leads to enhanced focus and job efficiency. However, employees with heavy workload and role conflict experienced diminished job performance, leading to dissatisfaction in both personal and work life (Mochtar, 2022). Aryee et al. (2005) and Medland et al. (2004) highlighted that high workload is associated with burnout, decreased productivity, and increased absenteeism. Additionally, research suggested that high workload negatively impacts job performance due to stress and burnout (Gorgievski et al., 2014; Apthioman & Pramono, 2020).

**H1:** There is a positively significant relationship between career advancement (work-life balance) and job performance among women in Sabah at 5% significance level.

*Career advancement (Family responsibilities) and job performance.*

Previous studies by Yet-Mee et al. (2013) and Jauhar & Lau (2018) mentioned that family responsibilities hinder career advancement and job performance due to competing demands. Likewise, Cole & Zuckerman (1987) found that married women, especially those with young children, often demonstrate high job performance, driven by increased sensitivity to financial needs, which motivates them to work harder (Campbell et al., 1994). Maimunah Ismail and Mariana Ibrahim (2008) also argued that strong family commitment reduces women's ability to balance work and career, impacting their potential for managerial advancement (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989).

**H2:** There is a positively significant relationship between career advancement (family responsibilities) and job performance among women in Sabah at 5% significance level.

*Career advancement (Fear of success) and job performance.*

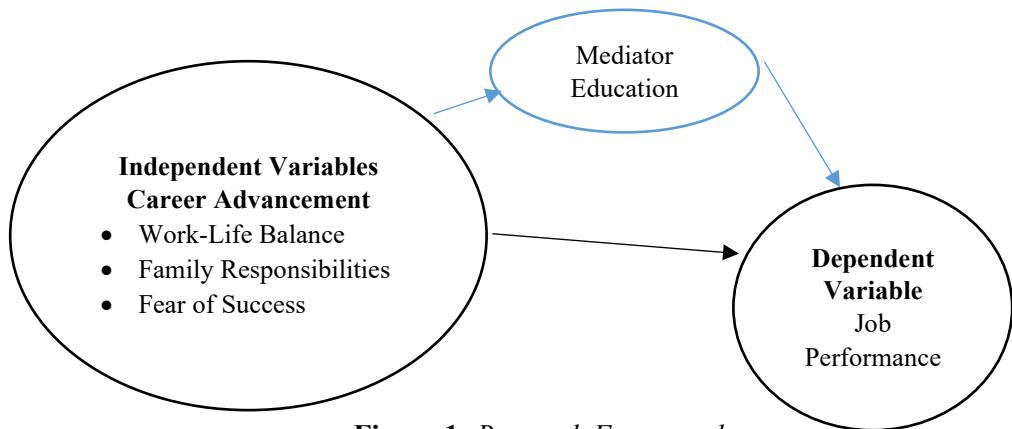
Traditional stereotypes often depict women as less capable of handling success compared to men (Burke et al., 2008). As a result, women tend to experience greater fear of success than men, which can undermine their confidence and ability to achieve goals and tasks effectively (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Kets de Vries (2017) suggested that fear of success arises when individuals question their abilities, leading to disappointment and a lack of self-confidence. This fear is exacerbated by the potential for social isolation and low self-esteem when individuals fail to meet their goals (Griffore, 1977).

**H3:** There is a positively significant relationship between career advancement (fear of success) and job performance among women in Sabah at 5% significance level.

*Mediating role of education.*

This study's framework aims to highlight that work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success often pose significant challenges for women employees in maintaining their high job performance. However, education plays an important role in mediating this relationship. Education improves a person's skills, problem-solving abilities, and knowledge, which helps mitigate the negative effects of career advancement measurement on job performance. Women with higher levels of education are better equipped to manage time, utilise resources effectively, make informed decisions, and balance both family and work obligations more efficiently (Becker, 1964). By developing competencies in response to pressure, education enables individuals to leverage their acquired skills to handle both personal and professional demands, thereby adapting to challenging situations. Consequently, education also boosts confidence and self-efficacy, empowering individuals to perform better despite the added burden of their responsibilities (Noe & Wilk, 1993). It serves as a buffer, reducing the impact on job performance and supporting career advancement. Furthermore, education plays a significant role in enhancing productivity by providing a pathway to balance familial duties and professional responsibilities effectively (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009).

*H4: There is a positively significant relationship between career advancement and job performance, where education acts as a mediator for women in Sabah at 5% significance level.*



**Figure 1: Research Framework**

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

This study used quantitative analysis to examine the relationship between career advancement measured by (1) work-life balance, (2) family responsibilities and (3) fear of success with job performance. Hence, this study also examined the relationship which link career advancement and job performance by incorporating the mediating role of education.

### *Research Instrument*

The study aimed to examine how education mediates the interplay between job performance and career advancement. The measurement for each item was either adopted or adapted from previous studies. The measurement items for work-life balance (WLB) were adapted from Uddin et al. (2023) and Irfan et al. (2023). Similarly, the measurement items for family responsibilities (FR) were also adopted from previous studies (Adu et al., 2023; Subramaniam et al., 2014). Next, the measurement items for fear of success (FOS) were adapted from past studies by Ishiyama and David Chabassol (1984) and André and Metzler (2011), while the measurement items for job performance (JB) were adapted from Koopmans et al. (2014) and Koopmans et al. (2012). Meanwhile, the measurement items for the mediating role of education were originally taken from Kasika (2015). All of the selected measurement items are deemed reliable and valid.

The demographic information of respondents, presented in the first section of this survey, focused on their age, marital status, education level, ethnicity, monthly income, length of employment, employment sector, and the respondents' district. Next, the other section covered items related to work-life balance (WLB), family responsibilities (FR), and fear of success (FOS). In addition, there were also sections for job performance (JB) and mediating education (ME). A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). A total of 27 items were used in this study.

### *Sample and empirical data collection.*

This study focuses on various sectors in Sabah, and questionnaires were distributed to women employees for empirical data collection. The data collection employed both offline and online methods. The survey questionnaires were distributed online using Google Forms, and simultaneously, the questionnaires were distributed by approaching the respondents face-to-face. Out of the 400 questionnaires distributed through Google Forms and face-to-face, only 390 responses were retained for further analysis.

### *Data evaluation*

IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and SmartPLS version 4 served as primary tools for analysing the data in this study. IBM SPSS software was used to conduct descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations). At the same time, SmartPLS was applied for structural equation modelling (SEM) to test the relationship between the factors of career advancement and job performance. Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis allowed this study to assess the reliability and validity of the proposed model.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Respondent profiling.*

Based on Table 1, the demographic profile of the respondents comprises women employees in Sabah, with a total of 390 participants surveyed. As shown in the table, the majority of respondents (40%) were aged between 21 and 30 years. This was followed by those aged between 31 and 40 years at 35.1%, those aged between 41 and 59 years at 16.2%, and those aged 20 years and below at 8.7%. In terms of marital status, the majority of respondents were married, representing 53.1%, while 46.9% were single. Regarding educational background, the majority of respondents hold a bachelor's degree represented 37.2%, SPM qualification at 29.5%, diploma at 20%, and STPM at 10.5%. In addition, 2.3% hold a master's degree, and 0.5% hold a PhD. As for years of employment, 45.6% of respondents have been employed for "More than 4 years." Meanwhile, 27.4% of respondents have been employed for "Less than 1 year," and 26.0% have been employed for "Between 2 to 3 years".

**Table 1** shows the respondents' profile (N=390)

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Sub-variable</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Age	20 years and below	8.7
	21 to 30	40.0
	31 to 40	35.1
	40 to 59	16.2
Marital Status	Single	46.9
	Married	53.1
Educational Level	SPM	29.5
	STPM	10.5
	Diploma	20.0

Years of Employment	Bachelor's Degree	37.2
	Bachelor's Master	2.3
	PhD	0.5
	Less Than 1 Year	27.4
	Between 2 and 3 Years	26.9
	More Than 4 Years	45.6

**Table 2** shows the results of reliability analysis

Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Work-Life Balance	0.784	0.799	0.610
Family Responsibilities	0.853	0.969	0.618
Fear of Success	0.723	0.749	0.545
Job Performance	0.751	0.767	0.501
Mediating Education	0.762	0.799	0.509

**Table 3** shows the results of validity analysis

Construct	AVE	Discrimination validity (Y/N)
Work-Life Balance	0.610	Y
Family Responsibilities	0.618	Y
Fear of Success	0.545	Y
Job Performance	0.501	Y
Mediating Education	0.509	Y

Based on Table 2, the results of the reliability analysis demonstrated that all constructs, including Work-Life Balance (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.789), Family Responsibilities (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.853), Fear of Success (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.723), and others, indicated satisfactory reliability, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.7. Furthermore, the validity analysis demonstrated that Work-Life Balance (AVE value = 0.610), Family Responsibilities (AVE value = 0.618), and Fear of Success (AVE value = 0.545) exhibited acceptable discriminant validity. Similarly, Job Performance (AVE value = 0.501) and Mediating Education (AVE value = 0.509) also met the acceptable threshold. These AVE values were deemed acceptable, particularly in exploratory research contexts, where the main objective was to examine the relationship between variables rather than solely establishing discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2016).

To test the hypothesis, a path analysis applying the structural equation model (SEM) was conducted. A total of eight hypotheses were developed to examine the relationship between career advancement factors—namely, work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success—and job performance, with the mediating role of education. The results of the verification revealed that work-life balance had a positive relationship with job performance ( $\beta = 0.078$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a t-value of 1.526, supporting the study's hypothesis.

Moreover, the analysis demonstrated a positively significant relationship between work-life balance and education ( $\beta = 0.442$ ,  $p < 0.002$ ), with a t-value of 5.856, supporting the hypothesis. There was also a positive but insignificant relationship between family responsibilities and job performance ( $\beta = 0.046$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a t-value of 0.939; however, this t-value does not exceed the threshold of 1.96, suggesting that the result of this relationship was statistically insignificant at the 95% confidence level. Moreover, the relationship between family responsibilities and education showed a negative correlation ( $\beta = -0.122$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a t-value of 2.290. This hypothesis is supported since the t-value exceeds the threshold for significance (1.96 at a 95% confidence level).

Similarly, fear of success was found to have a positive relationship with job performance ( $\beta = 0.210$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a t-value of 0.939. This study's hypothesis was insignificant at 95% confidence level, therefore it supported the null hypothesis. Meanwhile, there was a positively significant relationship between fear of success and education ( $\beta = 0.249$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with a t-value of 4.494, rejecting the null hypothesis of this study. Next, the relationship between education and job performance was found to be positive ( $\beta = 0.468$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with a t-value of 10.128. The results demonstrated support for the hypothesis, as the t-value exceeds the threshold (1.96) for significance at 95% confidence level.

**Table 3** shows the results of the hypothesis test

	Hypothesis (Path)	SRW	t-value	Support (Y/N)
H1	WLB $\rightarrow$ JB	0.078	1.526	Accepted
H2	WLB $\rightarrow$ ME	0.442	5.856	Accepted
H3	FR $\rightarrow$ JB	0.046	0.939	Accepted
H4	FR $\rightarrow$ ME	-0.122	2.290	Accepted
H5	FOS $\rightarrow$ JB	0.210	4.557	Accepted
H6	FOS $\rightarrow$ ME	0.249	4.494	Accepted
H7	ME $\rightarrow$ JB	0.468	10.128	Accepted

**Notes :** WLB – Work-Life Balance, FR – Family Responsibilities, FOS – Fear of Success, JB – Job Performance, ME – Mediating Education.

#### Results of Direct, Indirect, and Total Effects Analysis

As shown in Table 4, significant relationships were found between work-life balance (WLB), family responsibilities (FR), and fear of success (FOS). However, only work-life balance (WLB) and fear of success (FOS) showed a significant relationship with education. The mediating effect of the dependent and independent variables was also examined. The results revealed that education partially mediated the relationship between work-life balance and the fear of success concerning job performance. Additionally, education functioned as a full mediator in the relationship between family responsibilities and job performance.

**Table 4** shows the results of direct, indirect, and total effects analysis

	Hypothesis (Path)	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
H1	WLB $\rightarrow$ JB	0.080	0.207	0.284

H2	<b>WLB → ME</b>	0.444		0.442
H3	<b>FR → JB</b>	0.053	-0.057	-0.011
H4	<b>FR → ME</b>	-0.109		-0.122
H5	<b>FOS → JB</b>	0.208	0.116	0.326
H6	<b>FOS → ME</b>	0.248		0.249
H7	<b>ME → JB</b>	0.466		0.468
H8a	<b>WLB → ME → JB</b>		0.207	
H8b	<b>FR → ME → JB</b>		-0.057	
H8c	<b>FOS → ME → JB</b>		0.116	

**Notes :** *WLB – Work-Life Balance, FR – Family Responsibilities, FOS – Fear of Success, JB – Job Performance, ME – Mediating Education.*

### *Discussions and conclusion*

This study examined the relationship between career advancement, measured by three indicators—work-life balance, family responsibilities, and fear of success—and job performance, with education acting as a mediating variable. The analysis demonstrated a positive relationship between career advancement and job performance, as well as a significant link with the mediating role of education. These findings provide valuable insights into overcoming the barriers women face in career advancement and enhancing their job performance in the workplace. In this regard, the study's results hold pivotal implications for both policy and practice.

When individuals effectively manage their personal and professional lives, their job performance will improve in the workplace (Thevanes & Mangaleswaran, 2018). Therefore, this finding supports H<sub>1</sub>. Individuals who achieve work-life balance are more likely to pursue educational opportunities that improve their job performance (Becker, 1993), supporting H<sub>2</sub>. Likewise, when individuals effectively manage their family responsibilities, they are better able to contribute to higher job performance (Noe, 2013), thereby supporting H<sub>3</sub>. The analysis results indicated that family responsibilities negatively affect educational attainment, implying that individuals may feel burdened by family duties, making it harder for them to invest in education (Manzanera-Ruiz, 2023; Kumar & Meera, 2023; Kooij et al., 2011). Hence, H<sub>4</sub> is also supported.

The fear of success can motivate individuals to excel in their tasks and pursue further education (Barnett, 1991). Thus, this study's findings support hypotheses 5 and 6. Furthermore, when individuals achieve better outcomes in the workplace, it is often due to the positive influence of education; thereby, this finding supports H<sub>7</sub>. Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that education partially mediates the relationship between job performance and work-life balance. This demonstrates that achieving a work-life balance improves job performance, while also promoting educational attainment, which in turn further enhances job performance (Becker, 1993).

Meanwhile, this study's findings also demonstrated that education partially mediates the relationship between job performance and fear of success. The fear of success occurs in individuals who can directly enhance their job performance; however, this fear also motivates them to pursue further education, which in turn improves their job performance in the workplace (Barnett, 1991).

Furthermore, the findings also revealed that education fully mediates the relationship between job performance and family responsibilities. This implies that family responsibilities influence job performance, which in turn operates entirely through the role of education.

These study findings highlight that family responsibilities negatively impact education and, as a result, affect an individual's job performance. At the same time, family responsibilities could have a positive influence, such as motivating individuals to pursue qualifications or acquire additional skills, which can lead to improved job performance. Hence, education acts as an important link between job performance and family responsibilities (Becker, 1964; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

### ***Practical implications***

#### **a. Mentoring**

Mentoring plays a pivotal role in organisations by improving employees' career development, socialisation, learning, and preparation for managerial roles (Dockery & Sahl, 1998; Noe, 2002). For example, a mentor—typically an experienced and knowledgeable individual—provides guidance, feedback, advice, and support to facilitate both personal and professional growth (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Russell & Adams, 1997). Mentors often possess in-depth knowledge of the organisation or industry and focus on long-term objectives (Passmore, 2007).

Organisations could establish mentoring programs that support employees in achieving their career goals and maximise the use of their educational qualifications. For instance, IBM's mentoring program connects less experienced employees with senior leaders to offer career guidance and foster skill development. Such programs can be either short-term or long-term (Miao et al., 2017; Passmore, 2007).

#### **b. Employees' Occupational Self-efficacy**

Enhancing employees' self-efficacy is vital for improving job performance and promoting career advancement (Miao et al., 2017). To achieve this, organisations should create targeted training opportunities that build competence and confidence. Human resource management plays a critical role in organising, planning, and implementing employee development programs (Jehanzeb & Bashir, 2013).

#### **c. Implications for policies**

Policymakers could look to the labour laws of the United Kingdom as a reference. These policies have successfully protected the rights of female employees. The UK has implemented the Human Rights Act, which includes the following provisions:

- i. Article 8 also clarifies that "private life" encompasses personal privacy and is acceptable in a democratic society, taking into account the freedoms and rights of others (Ryan, 2024).
- ii. The UK emphasises the right to respect for family life, which includes family responsibilities. This protection covers relationships between siblings, married and

unmarried couples, grandparents, adoptive parents, children, and grandchildren (Ryan, 2024).

Based on this act, women in the UK experience greater engagement in the workforce and benefit from a more positive working environment. According to recent data, there are 16.06 million women aged sixteen and over in the UK as of October to December 2023 (Brigid & Georgina, 2024). If Sabah were to implement similar protections for women, it could enhance women's rights in the workforce and attract more female workers to the region.

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