



Review

Women and human capital – the Brunei Darussalam perspective

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Abstract

This paper examines various ways and key practices in which women may be sidelined – intentionally or unintentionally and/or that their potential is not fully tapped. It next examines the various strategies and cultural-fit ways in which the Bruneian Society and the women-folks can move forward or advance their position. Overall, there has, in fact, been a rising status of women in Brunei. Highlighted in this paper are several key strategies, and these can include having work and family/life balance, and networking.

Keywords: Women, Brunei Darussalam, role model, strategies to advance women; work-life balance, humaneness, warmth, mother leadership, feminine touch.

INTRODUCTION

Human capital is the organization's (nation's) important asset (Bassi and McMurrer, 2004). In Human Resource Management (HRM), equal employment opportunity or the treatment of individuals in all aspects of employment – such as hiring, promotion, training and other HRM practices – in a fair and objective manner can, in fact, help to fully harness the human capital of a country.

Brunei Darussalam's economy is heavily dependent on oil and gas. The key economic development objective of the Sultanate is diversification of its economic base, reducing its heavy reliance on the hydrocarbon industry. In its efforts, women are seen as playing an important role and contributing substantially in Brunei's economic growth and overall development. Bruneian women, who make up 47 per cent of the country's population, have enjoyed positive development and continued progress as a result of Brunei's pro-active efforts in improving the lives of its people (Borneo Bulletin, 2012).

Among other things, women are given equal rights and opportunities in education, training, healthcare, employment, business; ownership of assets and benefits

and citizenship. In business, women participate in various sectors and more than half of SMEs are owned by women. They have equal access to the provision of incentives and entrepreneurial support such as financial assistance schemes, access to Information Communication Technology (ICT), business counseling as well as training (Borneo Bulletin, 2012). True, Brunei may have narrowed the gender gap in terms of the number of women in the workforce yet there is still a shortage of women decision makers (Hab, 2013: A9). There is still a need to up both participation and position of women in the country.

Undeniably, in today's ICT and knowledge-based work place, employees are not just labor; they are assets. Nearly 70 per cent of businesses in Asian countries boast high-ranking women (Low, 2007). In Brunei Darussalam, those in the age category of 15 to 64 years which make up 68.8 percent of the total population consist of 138,129 males and 123,017 females (Wikipedia, 2007). Brunei Darussalam promotes gender equality and empowers women (EDP, 2005). Women here have equal access to education, health care and other state provided facilities (paid maternity leave) (NDP. 2007-2012). There is a small difference in the enrolments of boys and girls at both primary and secondary schools. The trends in tertiary education have changed since the late 1980's, the gender gap in tertiary education has increasingly been in favor of

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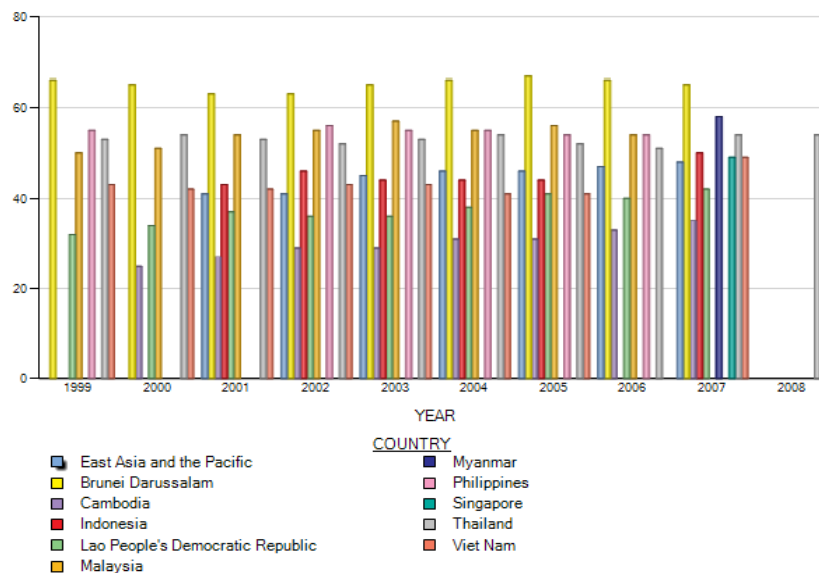


Figure 1. Percentage of female students. Total tertiary (SOURCE: <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/chartView.aspx>)

females (UNESCO, 2009; EDP, 2005). In the Southeast Asian region – among the four countries, namely, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, the statistics from 1999-2007 show that Brunei has the highest percentage of female students (over 60 per cent) in the tertiary level (Figure 1).

Among young adults in Brunei Darussalam, women literacy is higher than that of men (EDP, 2005). As at March 2008, the Civil Service comprised a total of 44,997 civil servants, and of this number, 22,022 are women (Jabatan Perkhimatan Awam, 2008). In 2012, with regard to the participation of women in labor force, it has increased from 20 per cent in 1971 to 58 per cent in 2010. Bruneian Women now constitute about 50.4 per cent of the civil service where they occupy 28 per cent of senior management posts (Borneo Bulletin, 2012). It is obvious that small nation-states such as Brunei need to fully harness and capitalize on its human resources including its womanpower to engine and boost its economic growth.

The paper is thus concerned with and focused – hoping to trigger further thinking – on such issues as:

- How does the Society help and allow women to optimize themselves for the good of the Society?
- How do women employees optimize themselves for the good of the Organization, for the Sultanate and for themselves?

The Objectives of the Paper

More specifically, in this paper, the purpose and objectives are to examine ways and practices in which women may

be sidelined – intentionally or unintentionally and/ or that their potential is not fully tapped. Additionally, this paper also discusses the various strategies and ways in which the Bruneian Society and the womenfolk can up or advance the position of women so as to fully tap the Sultanate's human capital and contribute to its economic growth and well-being.

Key Practices That Have Led Women to Be Side-lined

Today, even in developed European countries, women remain underrepresented or played down in corporate boards and executive committees (McKinsey & Company, 2012: 1). In this paper, the authors will examine the various ways and practices in which have led women to be sidelined – intentionally or unintentionally, and/ or that their potential is not being fully harnessed. These include cultural practices such as child-rearing practices, stereotyping and other practices.

Stereotyping or perceptual distortions long exist; and stereotypes obscure individual differences and strengths or assets (Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn, 1994). Women also face the age-old Asian or traditional bias, stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. In fact, these include bias, discrimination or glass-ceiling impositions against women executives too. The latter still prevails (based on several respondents whom the researchers spoke to prior to writing this paper; 15 respondents or 75 percent of the total number of respondents concurred to this). This only serves to amplify Kim's (2007) report that discrimination and gender inequality is losing Asia-Pacific

countries millions of dollars every year; gender equality could help boost Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Low, 2008).

Young girls are asked to act gently, giving way to their male siblings, “never be ‘bold’ so as to frighten the boys’ and never ‘draw attention to herself’” (Soekanto, 2007: 6). Girls are also encouraged not to play rough or in a tomboyish fashion, but rather to play girlish games, dolls and soft toys. “They must be seen to take part in soft activities” (several respondents’ inputs), better still engaging in “the traditional activities such as cooking”.

Besides, women also seek lower level jobs. Recent figures show that women jobseekers outnumber men. There are:

1,146 females compared to 473 males [age category of 18 to 30 years old]

328 females compared to 107 males [age category of 31 to 65 years old]

from the total number of 2054 are seeking for clerical and other related jobs (Labor Dept., cited in Han, 2007: 1).

This reinforces dual market theory (cited in Watson, 1997). Women comprise an ‘out-group’ and are treated as such, and form the basis of an industrial reserve providing the source of additional labor when society requires it.

The male and female labor force participation rates (LFPR) in Brunei Darussalam were 60 percent and 82.5 percent in 2006/7, respectively (NDP 2007-2012). The number of women in civil service increased by 11 percent from 2001 to 2005 (NDP, 2007-2012). While women comprise half the country’s population, they still occupy just one in five senior-level civil service positions (EDP, 2005). The challenge for the Government is to give equal opportunity to women in civil service and private sector particularly in the higher positions. There is still an expectation in society (Islam) that men will occupy the most senior positions.

The article next examines the various key strategies and cultural-fit ways in which the Bruneian Society and the women-folks can advance their position.

Some Key Strategies and Ways to Advance the Position of Women

1 Applying Cultural-fit Ways

Here, interestingly, Low (2013) has pointed out that: “Just as a leader should be proactive, a parent should also not be passive or non-involved. ‘Thou shalt not be a passive parent!’ (Young, 2004, cited in Low, 2013). Proactive, mother seems to lead best, and the leadership style is that of being ‘gentle’ (respondents’ inputs), nurturing, showing care and concern, as well as being soft (feeling, empathetic, kind, warm) yet getting things done.

In some societies and cultures, women, in fact, play a key role, and this is more evident in certain matriarchal or matrilineal societies such as the Minangkabaus of Sumatra (Sorensen, 1993 and Lebar, 1972, cited in Low, 2013), Iroquois of North America and the Lovedu of Africa. Leading the woman or the mother way, is, nothing less or equally good as men; it is apt and most suited for a woman to lead in such way as they are also tapping their strengths and qualities.

More so, the authors would add that certain child-rearing practices needs to be overhauled or changed. Girls’ power is to be promoted, and parents can raise their girls – in Islamic ways – as strong individuals. A local writer has expressed that parents need to encourage their daughters to be “bolder” and not be “meek”. “Father(s) should have... asked (the) daughter to have the first choice when (distributing candies or gifts) because that was what the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) would have done. The Prophet taught Muslims that when they had gifts, they should first give them to their daughters (Soekanto, 2007: 6). Indeed, girls who are raised in a family or household where her needs and preferences are respected would grow up to be empowered, self-respected, confident and achieving ladies.

“Such confident women know that they are equal to their brothers as long as they are beware of Allah SWT.” (Soekanto, 2007: 6). Woman is equal to man in the eyes of God (Al-Quran, *As Saffat* (37): 153, cited in Ide, 1996: 7) and in Islamic Brunei context, the religion stresses on equality of treatment of sons and daughters. There are many *Hadiths* that stress on the importance of taking good care of the women-folks.

Islam as the complete and perfect way of life is reinforced in the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB: Melayu, Islam, Beraja). As His Majesty the Sultan in his *Titah* (official speech) said that Malay Islamic Monarchy is not new, but has been existed since several centuries ago. In his proclamation, His Majesty said that “....Brunei Darussalam is and with the blessing of Allah (to Whom be praised and whose name to be exalted) shall be forever a sovereign, democratic and independent Malay Muslim Monarchy upon the teachings of Islam according to Ahli Sunnah Waljamaah”.

Other strategies and ways, to mention several, include the womenfolk being in business, and as executives, balancing between work and family, as well as they having role models which the researcher-authors will later elaborate.

2 Having Work and Family/life Balance

A balance between work and family/life is also necessary to better the position of women in society. Besides, Brunei upholds its national philosophy of “MIB: Melayu, Islam dan Beraja” (in Bahasa, meaning, Malay Islamic Monarchy).

Islamic values also stress on family and personal relationships. Brunei's National Plan of Action for Women has also outlined measures to address Work Life Harmony, among others (Borneo Bulletin, 2012).

Family closeness among family members should also be fostered. The children grow well too. The family should always be catered and cared for. In fact, the balance between work and family/life has become "one of the most important factors in the employment relationship" (McShane and Von Glinow, 2008: 11). Supervisors can, at times, accommodate to and give time off to their female employees to attend to their children or non-work/ family issues. Besides, work-family balance – minimizing conflict between work and non-work demands – is also for the good of the company since the women-folks and even the men in the workforce are likely to be happier. And a happier women and in fact, the general workforce is likely to result in the company having a higher level of output and productivity.

Additionally, the society and businesses can also adopt "family-friendly" ways and these include day-care, part-time work, assistance with family problems and others (Snell and Bohlander, 2007: 32), and perhaps these need to be thought out and be provided for, and more can be done. Then again, work-life balance policies may also include flexible work arrangements such as flexible working hours, working from home and a shift system that allow for a balance between work responsibilities and personal responsibilities (Redmond, Valiulis and Drew, 2006: 18). Nonetheless, it is good to point out that Brunei's National Plan of Action for Women has also incorporated the setting up or delivery of better working environment, family friendly centers and breast-feeding rooms at work places, training for employees on time management and roadshows to increase public awareness on the need for work-life balance (Borneo Bulletin, 2012).

3 Having Role Models to Follow

Women, who use their strengths, can easily connect with others and they thrive at the workplace (Barsh; Mogelof, and Webb, 2010). Among other things, women are also inclined to use role model and inspiration when leading or managing; role model here refers not just to being a role model, but also to building respect and considering ethical consequences of decisions. Inspiration comprises giving a convincing vision of the future and inspiring optimism about going about or doing it. Hence, it is good for women to have role models where they could emulate or admire. In Brunei, other than the royalties including Her Majesty Raja Isteri Pengiran Anak Hajah Saleha, Her Royal Highness Princess Hajah Masna and Pengiran Anak Isteri Pengiran Anak Sarah (the wife of the Crown Prince of Brunei), top female professionals and leaders – serving as role models – can also be shining examples for women to

follow. And they include Datin Paduka Hjh. Adina, the first woman to be appointed as Deputy Minister in Brunei (in 2010), Haslina Taib, the CEO of Bag Networks and Sharifah Rozlina, the owner of Megastrike Bowl.

Women in the Sultanate have been recognized recently for their achievements. In 2009, eight local female leaders received honors for their exceptional achievements in various fields at the Asia Inc. Forum's Women Achievers Awards Ceremony. Another five women leader was awarded during the "Women in Business Conference 2009". And in 2010, four Bruneian women were honored at "The Women's Forum" yesterday, in recognition for their leadership and achievements in their respective fields and their contribution to the Brunei economy (AsiaInc Forum, 2010).

Curiously so, even ordinary mothers can also be role models, and why are the authors saying this; allow them to explain. A survey in 2005 Mother's Day by the professional women's networking organization WorldWit uncovered that 69 per cent would rather work for a mother than a non-mother, and only 2 per cent prefer a non-mother. They say mothers have patience and listening skills, and understand when others encounter family demands (Jones, 2006). Women leaders and managers, for that matter, any leaders can thus emulate mothers in that they are patient, have good listening skills and that they understand when others face family demands.

4 Being a Force - The Role of Journalists and Media

Journalists – particularly women can also be a force to bring about greater advancement and participation of women. They themselves have to change the stereotypes (Rosli, 2007: 4). Additionally, to break the artificial barriers or glass ceilings, women who are successful in their respective careers can also help, becoming mentors to their fellow female colleagues. The former can help to coach and teach the latter the ropes and skills to improve themselves and move up the corporate ladder.

The researchers strongly advocate the twin ideas of leading or senior professional women serving as role models and coaches as well as taking the responsibilities of mentoring their female juniors. As Low (2006) has argued, successful women professionals and business owners can also be role models for women to follow, emulate or be simply inspired by.

5 Networking and Building Connections

As also mentioned by Low (2013), networking and building connections are useful for not only for the men, but also, for the females too.

Bruneian women can also rely on the old girls' networks for contacts, support, lending a hand to each other and for overall mutual gains. For example, profess-

sional or working female graduates can rely on their alma maters such as the Women Graduates Association of Brunei Darussalam. Career networking is critical, as Snell and Bohlander (2007: 206) put it: It is the process of establishing mutually beneficial relationships with other business people, including potential clients and customers... ..Through networking, individuals often find out about new jobs, professional trends and other opportunities.

When women make it a point to form and up-keep relationships with people above, below and at the same level as themselves, they are likely to get some coaching, advice, help and support to advance themselves.

And indeed, for women's own betterment, they can do more than career networking that is, simply networking to help and support each other.

One interviewee intimated to the researchers these: "There are also women who can work independently i.e. without asking support from other Bruneian women. It is good to network in business but for women in the academia, it has to be with women of the same area of expertise. Conference can be a good venue to meet potential collaborators. One will be able to meet people having similar research interests and they are not necessarily women; networking helps."

6 Leveraging the Use of Co-operatives

Interestingly, the co-operative sector in Brunei Darussalam is the third most important engine of growth after the public and private sector (Hussin, HJ, 2007) and it can be a strong factor, viable in practicing and spreading positive values (Han, 2007a). In India, cooperatives allow women to gain their incomes and improve their positions; cooperatives in most ways help to alleviate the country's problems of unemployment.

Here, it is suggested that co-operatives are also set up, managed and run by women for women and society. As in the case of a Central Asian country, Low (2006a) has argued that women self-help group and cooperatives set up in the rural areas help women to better their incomes.

"Co-operatives must leverage on their strengths and at the same time remain flexible and swift in responding to the domestic and global challenges" (Brunei's Minister of Industry and Primary Resources, Pehin Orang Kaya Setia Pahlawan Dato Seri Setia Dr. Hj. Ahmad Hj. Jumat cited by Hussin HJ, 2007). In that light and in meeting national challenges, the co-operatives can perhaps focus on creating a sustainable, socially focused business such as childcare centers, and support the women-folks (Low, 2008).

In short, these co-operatives can play a positive role, helping to support the women's cause, build greater confidence and camaraderie among women as well as ensuring and facilitating that their women members strike or pursue a work-family balance.

7 Applying Soft Power

Soft power is influential and persuasive, and Low (2006) has argued that women can also apply soft power to move up the corporate ladder. Citing a Chinese proverb, "us(ing) power to curb power", Low (2013) further adds of soft power being attractive and very appealing. Additionally, Low (2013) has proposed that women, being more feminine, are better users of soft power. The leaders' showing love, care and concern is truly very influential to their followers or people. When leaders demonstrate that they care and show their concern to their people, they would be better appealed to their people. Among other things, Low (2013) and Grzelakowski (2005) also argued that mothers made good, if not better leaders too. Besides, they are more exposed to an array of experiences such as bringing up children, multiple tasking and resolving several other issues or challenges, and these make them strong, even resilient leaders as well as benefiting their people.

Low (2012: 950) added that, "the leader by the way of the Butterfly speaks of the soft side of leadership"; "it implies a feeling and caring leader" (several interviewees' comments/ inputs). This ties-in with the findings and analysis that one "dedicates one's life with helping and serving others" (interviewees' comments).

He further argued that:

The Butterfly sort of person (leader)... ..would display or reveal the soft, gentle or tender side; "such a person or leader promotes humaneness" and "tenderness" (interviewees' comments), and take relationships importantly. They display part of, the essence, the core or the spirit of what... (is labeled) as the quintessentially Phoenix or Mother Leadership ways, the wise ways derived from ancient Chinese or Asian ways of leading gently and being successful. Ordinarily, they are soft and kind, caring about their relationships, especially so, with those who are close to them or in other words, their loved ones. "Women promote humaneness and especially so after they went through child births" (interviewees' comments), and have children of their own; and here, these tie-in with what Grzelakowski (2005: 72) has said, that is, "Babies promote humaneness" (and pregnancies bring warmth to mothers; bold authors').

The authors are stressing here that mother leadership, ordinarily people-centered, is also nurturing and caring. Mother leaders and women can truly help themselves to be more influential or persuasive by being more warmth and promoting humaneness. With strong concern for people, the mother leader thus really relates, giving an added edge to "the feminine touch (which) is usually soft and tender" (Low, 2013: 291). This is also supported by studies made by Bass and Avolio (eds.) (1994); women are more likely to be trusted and respected and show greater concern for individual needs. They went on to

conclude that women are also more nurturing, caring and sensitive than men, and certainly these characteristics are more in alignment with transformational leadership.

Interestingly, it is also critical to note that “women who are dual-centric (as opposed to women who are only focused on work) have advanced to higher reporting levels and feel more successful in their home lives” (Galinsky 2003, cited in Grzelakowski 2005: 38). Perhaps what needs to be stressed as highlighted by Low (2013) is that not all mothers or motherhood inevitably or instinctively makes women better or finer leaders, reasonably-speaking being motherhood helps, and it is also dependent on the process of individual’s being aware and that individual generally learns; and still at that, whether the individual does satisfactorily also depends on intra-personal learning. Overall, most women also become more aware, perhaps as Grzelakowski (2005: 67) has underscored, “less inhibited when they are pregnant. It starts in the doctor’s office. Then, once you begin to show, people react to you differently. They offer you their seats, open doors, and become more caring toward you. . . ‘People do view you differently.’” One becomes more conscious or mindful. Then, it triggers knowing and perhaps more unwitting learning in women that leads them to be leaders or at least grows some necessary leadership skills.

It is also worthy to further note that today’s young employees need or expect care, concern and compassion. They would then produce better output, both in quality and in quantity. When they were born, their parents cared for them, showing much affection, some even put signs in their cars warning other drivers: Prince (Baby/Princess) on Board. Even after their early childhood years, they were showered with tender, loving care. Fathers, mothers, teachers, and coaches, it is felt, presented them a lot more love than previous generations experienced. As a result, it can be said that they take it that parental figures at work such as a parent will exhibit kindness and nurturing qualities (Low, 2013).

8 Being More Proactive and Voicing out More

It can also be argued that more so in Asia and Brunei in particular where family and collectivist values are stressed (Low, 2013), women/ mother leadership would have strong relevance and women need to play a more proactive role, and in fact, interestingly, their leadership role – gentle, kind and being caring and feminine – can be a niche in leading people effectively and persuasively.

Of relevance, “now we can see that there are more women at the university level and there will be more women joining the labour force, but what is still lacking is child-friendly policies and programmes for the working mother,” said Datin Hajah Masni, the vice president of the Council of Women of Brunei Darussalam (cited in Hab, 2013: A9). Women therefore need to voice out more (Hab,

2013). They indeed need to voice more and let others know more of their various roles, duties and responsibilities so others and those around them understand them better. Asians including Asian women need to voice out more; they also need to write more so that their male counterparts, fellow Asians and others know their needs and position to be their allies, sponsors or champions, assisting them further in whatever ways available.

Undoubtedly, women need to be more proactive; Bruneian or Asian women can also be (more) proactive by...

9 Promoting and Self-marketing Women and Women’s Roles

Bruneian women can indeed promote and self-market themselves better. In the West including the United States, there is a reluctance to promote oneself (McKinsey and Company; 2012), and this is also an issue. “Women think that everyone can see how hard they work, so they don’t have to communicate it,” one executive highlighted (cited in McKinsey and Company; 2012: 4).

Bruneian women should and can promote themselves and women’s roles, if they do not do it, no one else could do better than them.

They can also help and promote themselves and women’s roles through women’s associations and clubs with prominent women figures including woman Ministers and/or Members of Parliaments (MPs) as their patronesses, benefactors, sponsors, advocates and champions (Low 2006: 59, bold, authors’). As mentioned by Low (2008), the media people and journalists—particularly women can also be an endorsing, promoting and self-marketing force to encourage and bring about greater advancement and participation of women. Women themselves have to change the stereotypes (Rosli 2007, cited in Low, 2013; 2008); they make themselves.

Please see Figure 2 which shows a summary of the key strategies and ways examined to advance the position of women in Brunei.

CONCLUSION

In tapping their potentials, women can sponsor, support and help themselves, and be pro-active and empowered; and they, with their male counterparts as partners can make much progress for the Sultanate. It is also worthy to note that all in all, when women anywhere and everywhere in the world stand up, it does not necessarily mean that men must fall or become smaller. It actually means that men must stand together with women. Men, in fact, must partner and support women, their better, if not equally, good halves.

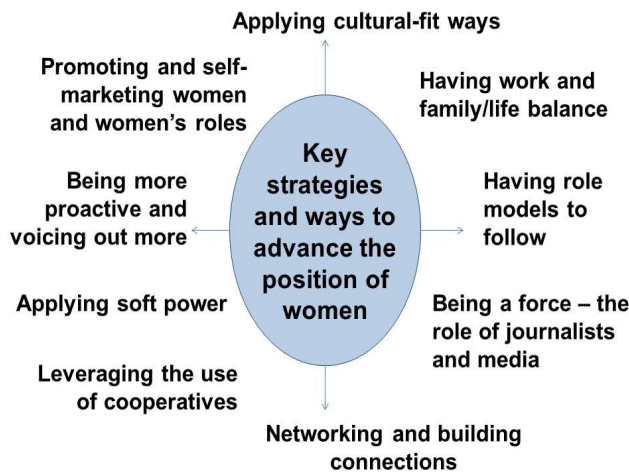


Figure 2 above shows a summary of the key strategies and ways women can apply to advance their position (in Brunei).

The key strategies to advance women, as outlined above, are by no means exhaustive; further research and studies on women and the Bruneian Society should be made. The authors earnestly hope that this paper sets Bruneians and scholars alike to reflect and think further on the various strategies and ways in which the Bruneian Society and the womenfolk can advance the position of women, so as to fully tap the Sultanate's human capital and contribute to its economic growth, development and well-being.

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