Local Goverment Accountability in the Lens of Women Community in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine women participation to determine the level of accountability delivered by staffs and councillors in Malaysian local government. Survey method was used for the study and a sample of three hundred eighty five (385) women were randomly selected from the entire population of women that frequently were dealing with local government administration, especially involved in activities organised by local government. Twenty-items questionnaires were adopted from previous measurement to gain the relevant data. Data collected were analysed using frequency and percentage distribution. The results of the study revealed that women citizens were satisfied with the execution of local government accountability and responsibility. This satisfaction level is seen to rise in recent years because of performance of each local government in Malaysia being monitored and evaluated each year using star rating system. The evaluations assessed all functions of local government including public services. Therefore, local governments are always enhancing their services to meet the requirements of star rating.
Keywords: local government; accountability; women participation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Malaysian government is in the phase of transforming government services and moving towards high capital income country with excellent services and productivities. This movement requires all level of government to enhance their accountability and productivity including local government. In this regards, local governments are being given high mandate to execute their responsibility and accountability to meet expectation of society. Local government is a lowest level government with the functions to provide local services for citizens in rural and urban areas. This function has

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created close relationship between citizens and local governments. In fact, services provided by local governments are representing image for the whole government consist of federal, state and local government. In delivering their services, local governments are required to assess the level of satisfaction of community including women as feedback to improve their services (Akkas**,** 2014).

As a whole in every country in the world shows that the population of women is half of the total population. However, the percentage of women appointed in main positions of the country is limited; for example, in an average only 22% of women are seen appointed as a Member of Parliament worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2015). It is further noted that internationally, across more than 190 countries of the world and only 13% of the women who was appointed as the head of State and 15% were appointed as Ambassador of the United Nations (Paxton, and Hughes, 2015).

The number of small participation of women in public administration can also be seen in the local government administration. For example, in Germany, women appointed to town councils is about 4.2% (Magin, 2011) and in most local government in England women representatives are approximately between 17%-25% for the year 2009 (Ransford and Thomson, 2011).

In Malaysia, the representative of women as members of Parliament saw little progress in percentage 10.4% against women in national parliaments worldwide.This statistic indicates that women's representation in Parliament ranked in second from bottom compared with other Southeast Asian countries (Yusoff, Sarjoon and Othman, 2016). Although, statistically citizen population in Malaysia indicated that men are outnumbered women. However for the productivity age of citizen in Malaysia demostates that women population is slightly less in number compared with men. For instance, according to national census on 2016, women population is 16.4 million and male 15.3 million (Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia, 2016).

At the same time, government is emphasised on gender equality by setting a target of at least 30% women to be involved in decision making as announced in 9th Malaysian Plan (9MP) (UNDP, 2006). This indicates that the government is encouraging the entire population to get involved and be part of the development of the country's agenda. This phenomena is not only perceived importantly by developing country like Malaysia, but also being government agenda in other countries around the world. Lately the world has witnessed an increase in the pressure and demands of women and minority to be given the opportunity to have some power and recognition in local government accountability. Today, governments are encouraging women to play an important role in the accountability of local government (Moyo, 2014).

Previous studies conclude that women's participation in local government can give great impact to the development of a country. Todes, Sithole and Williamson (2010) states that the right of women to get involved in local government is part of the rights that must be respected by all parties. Therefore the views and input of the people must be taken into account in any decision making process, especially involving their affairs.

Women are also involved in programs organised by the local government. Women's participation in local government are actively seen in both as a council member or officer and are off equal with the man.

Therefore, this article discusses women's perceptions on the accountability of local governments present a more dimensional look to the general perspective, programs, services, infrastructure and councilors in the service delivery system that is delivered by local government governance today.

Women's Participation in Local Government

Participation can be defined as a process of influencing citizens and stakeholders to engage in decision making towards the production of government services. The concept of participation has emerged during the emergence of human civilization (Haque, 2003).

The issue of public participation have focused specifically in the field of public management and international development since three decades ago. Researchers in public administration found that public participation in development at the local level show democracy in a country's development (Roberts, 2004; Rahman, 2005).

World Bank (2002) defines participation as a process involving the bodies of authority to influence the interests of the environment, the distribution of resources, decision-making and the assessibality of using public goods and services. This includes the participation of the people to create partnership between investors, manufacturers and operators who developed the local development agenda that benefit the residents and operators of the project.

Therefore, participation could encourage people to share the benefits of local development. After that, people can also contribute to the development in a way that is meaningful for their own, local community and the government as a whole (Ahmad, Sarker & Ahmad, 1998). Therefore, participation will not only improve the efficiency of the local government services, but can also empower local residents.

To empower local communities, the government is giving particular attention to women to engage in decision-making at the local government level. The focus on women is in line with government targets to encourage the participation of 30% of women in government decision making.

Women's involvement in local government can depend on the level of democracy practised. Women can be disadvantaged by a system of local government which is strictly controlled by central government that is totally reliant on central funding, has little accountability to its community and to which members are appointed. Women are more likely to participate in a devolved system of local government that, while working within central or state government statute, has more autonomy, greater financial freedom, holds regular elections and is open to change.

Women's participation in local government is influenced by the level of democracy adopted by the agencies concerned. In the case of the local government system fully control by the federal government in determining local administration including council member selection and involvement of the community, has resulted in limiting the women participation. Especially, in Malaysia, the selection of the management of local government is not determined by elections and it depends on the policy determined by the state government and the federal government in the determination of local government governance. However, at present indicates the growing of government's efforts to involve women in government programs. Beyond that, education opportunities and capabilities of women is increasingly recognised by the government to spearhead government administration, including appointing women as minister in the cabinet of the Malaysian government (Yusoff, Sarjoon and Othman, 2016).

The lack of quality education at a high level is a factor identified in Malaysia that has limited both women's involvement and their ability to speak effectively once elected. However this is changing as a result of an emphasis on equal opportunities in education and more women having access to tertiary education. Family responsibilities and the practical difficulties of balancing family commitments act as barriers to participation and to furthering their careers.

Quality education level has been identified as barriers that limit the participation of women at the higher levels. In addition, generally the lack of networking and negotiation skills is also a distraction on women to be more confident in leading an administration. However, in line with technological advances and globalisation development leads to huge opportunities to women to gain better education and rights in other aspects. Particularly, these days, employers are encouraging equality practices to people regardless of gender or physical weakness. This allows women to develop skills and build a business network both locally and internationally in any fields.

In local government, the participation of women not only as the local community which assist government by report the progress and usage of the services provided by local governments. However, women were given the opportunity as a member of council and committee of community representative that demostrates women ability to managing local issues in the area represents. Needs of representatives of women related in managing issues related to the development of entrepreneurship, education and maximum use of women ability. Representatives of women can help to develop connection between citizens who are not working or single mothers who are looking for a source of income with government assistance for generating family income.

Other initiative to encourage women in local government administration is providing some allocation specifically for women participation. For instance, in Johor, the reform of local government in order to make the restructuring policy of appointing members of local councils in all local authorities within the state of Johor. This is because the accountability system within the local government service is currently not fully achieved its aims to undermine the confidence of the public to the local government itself. Therefore, new policies on offer are more focused on energy and new ideas are competitive in terms of approach and service delivery to the public or consumers. One aspect that is emphasised is to utilise one-third of the total number of councilors in each local authority to be filled by local women, who are capable than in manging works and interested with local agenda such as persons with disabilities. Through this change of phase, allowing local authorities to get a new one with a more positive impact through energy and new ideas in women. In the area of governance in the field, this will open up opportunities and more space to these people to participate in local development. Women are more likely to be more open and proactive in finding new and creative approaches to achieve an objective and responsive in answering, deliver and address the current issues at the local level (Piotrowski and Van Ryzin, 2007).

According to Khattak, (1996) a popular belief was that with the high rate of illiteracy women would not be able to participate effectively in local self-government, however, these have been proven wrong as in the case of India. In fact, the presence, in India, of all-women popularly elected panchayats (a village council) running their affairs effectively proves that women are capable of taking charge. This does not mean that there are no problems in India. Indian women have complained that they are often called to meetings of a panchayat only when the quorum was incomplete or to put their signature on documents, and that they often do not have the financial resources to monitor programs for women and children which the panchayats have undertaken. However, a federation of women from local bodies has been formed to serve as a platform for sharing experiences and the problems women face in villages. There were suggestions that resolutions passed by a panchayat in the absence of women members should not be accepted and

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those women councilors should be entrusted with implementing programs for women and children.

Moyo, Francis, and Ndlovu, (2012) concur that in South Africa, women should participate and has the right to give suggestion and evaluate service delivery at their local government tertitory. Women as workers also pay for the tax charges on their income, properties are suppose have right to get involve in determine basic development such as building location and basic facilities for poorest as weakest group in society. They should ideally be in the forefront of local electoral politics and that their input into municipal decision-making and policy are critical and should be considered (Pottie, 2001). Local government is obliged to ensure the full presence and participation of women in various municipal structures from strategic community based structures such as ward committees to the most strategic decision-making structures such as the mayoral committees. However, Gasela (2007) warns against the assumption that more women in local government will necessarily lead to a stronger voice for gender equality. It is also to be noted that it is not guaranteed that getting more women in local government will ensure that the women's voices are heard (OECD, 2011). There might be a need for more focused intervention to translate what the researcher terms "gender presence to gender gains" (Paxton & Hughes, 2015). This argument presents opportunity to on the South African's state of affairs with regard to women in local government, both at administrative and political decision-making and leadership levels.

Access to and participation in decision-making and leadership positions is strategic and meaningful life choices accompanying empowerment. At this point, the requirement women are represented in decision-making and leadership positions or consulted is necessary but not sufficient because it raises questions of whether their voices are actually heard and acted upon (Moser and Moser in Kabeer, 2005). Debusscher and Anna (2012) argued that a prerequisite to transforming the development agenda is to give women who are affected by development interventions a voice to shape the objectives, priorities and strategies of development. It is critical that provision is made to ensure that policy changes are implemented in ways that allow women to actively participate, to monitor, and to hold policy-makers and relevant actors accountable for their actions as participation of women in other spheres of life may be hindered. This assertion forms part of the exploration of full participation of women in local government decision-making and leadership positions.

Representation and consultation of women in local government decision-making and leadership roles should inform local government policy changes to ensure relevance, identification of gender transformation objectives, priorities and strategies, monitoring and future accountability. The possibilities of presence versus representation cannot be ignored. Presence does not necessarily translate into impact in the same way as numbers does

not necessarily result in influence. For example, the presence of women is drawn from a narrow elite who have been invited rather than elected and thus have no grassroots constituency to represent and to account, such presence is in essence tokenism and would not contribute significantly to the broader women's empowerment initiatives (Akkas, 2014) . This brings into the issues of access and full participation in contrast with presence and representation. The extent of women's impact in decision-making and leadership positions in local government will depend on their activism and passion for the feminist cause of women empowerment and gender equality. It is this feminist activism that will motivate them to represent women's issues and concerns. It is, however, crucial that through the women's movement, women's activism is revived from grassroots community structures through to the highest echelons of institutions. This, together with creating women's accountability forums and networks, would ensure that women in decision-making and leadership positions are continuously held accountable by their counterparts. These robust engagements should seek to answer some of the questions such as; how can women maximise their impact on the political processes in local government? What strategies are most useful in increasing their effectiveness? What lessons can women in local government decision-making and leadership positions share with those aspiring to enter the field? (Burnet, 2011). These alternatives should be informed by sustainable strategies of ensuring representation through women's critical mass in these decision-making and leadership positions whilst also pushing for substantive participation in order to promote and put women's issues and concerns on the mainstream institutional agendas and discussions. Burnet (2011) stressed that these approaches would not only increase women's chances of their own success, but they will also pave the way for a new generation of women to enter into decision-making and leadership positions. The researcher believes that an intense exploration of these alternatives will further sharpen and strengthen women's mandate in these positions of influence and power, which will somewhat merge the strength of the women's critical mass and the dire need for women's substantive participation.

METODOLOGY

This study is a quantitative research using questionnaires as a medium of data collection. The study population consisted of a community of women who are involved with seven local government in Malaysia and the selection of respondents were made using a random sampling method in which sampling of 385 respondents to the study. For the purpose of obtaining data on the accountability of local government based on the dimensions of the present general perspectives, the implementation of programs, services, infrastructure and councilors, the unit of analysis used is based on the perception of women as individual communities. Data processing is performed by a computer using the Statistical Package for the Social Science or SPSS version 20.0 and presentation of the findings based on the mean.

RESULT

In this study, descriptive statistic was conducted using mean analysis. Each question except the personal information was measured using a Likert scale of four (4) points, in which '1' represents "Strongly Disagree" '2' represents "Disagree" '3' represents "Agree" '4' represents "Strongly Agree". Analysis for this part use the ranges of four (4) point Likert scales were categorised into equal sized, namely low, moderate and high. Re-coding portion starts from the smallest value obtained from the respondents, the first and largest value is 4. In equation form: Range = highest score - Lowest Score. The range for each interval is: 4-1 / 3 = 1.00. This means that, for this part of each interval should contain the 1:00 range. Table 1 show the scores were classified according to a predetermined level. Table 2 indicates the mean according to women citizen.

Table 1

Mean Score for Each Level Variables

Score	Level
1.00 to 2.00	low
2.01 to 3.00	moderate
3.01 to 4.00	high

Table 2

Mean According toWomen Citizen

Variables	women citizen
	Mean
General Perspective	3.77
Program	3.80
Services	3.66
Infrastructure	3.86
Councilors	3.96

DISCUSSION

Overall, the study shows the perception of women community on the level of accountability in local government is at a high level. In this study, general perspective refer to having effective tool to make a complaint, efficiency of local government officers, sufficient employees to serve clients and financial system of local government. This high perception on general perspective of

local government indicates that the authorities gives particular attention and always potray positive image in meeting the needs of local residents and fulfill the performance by KPI stated by the state and the federal government. In particular, recently local governments were evaluated in terms of the aspects of performance including management, finance, population and the well-being of the local community in order to meet the criteria for a higher status upgrade.

Furthermore, these days local government employees adequately undergoes training, achieve annual work target that lead them to give priority in serving clients. However, there was an item of the women community who were unclear with local financial planning system by local government. This happened probably because local government did not disclose the information about their financial planning systems. Or the clients are not interested to find out more about the financial planning systems according to the ministry's financial procedures... General perspective is very important as a general perception of community towards management of local authorities in overall.

This general perspective was related to the organisational competence and the result from this aspect is in line with previous study conducted by Rakickaite, Juceviciene and Vaitkiene (2011) that indicated organidation's internal capability to reach its goals and how they deal with customers. In this study seems that women community perceived the potential of organisational competence belongs to employees at individual and collective levels. In each of these levels, there are three distinct groups of organisational competence components: individual and collective knowledge; individual and collective skills and abilities; individual and collective value, and general agreements. This component allows employees applying their skills facing situations to offer effective solutions to problems and enables individuals and groups to act in complex situations.

In term of program by local government, women community responded at a high level about the program by local government. The results showed communities participating in the program that causes positive impact that can be derived from the activities. The findings acquired in this study have similar findings with previous studies conducted by Mohammadi, S. H., Ahmad, N., Norazizan, S., Soroush, A., and Emby, Z. (2011). They found positive perception of respondents toward participation in social activities. The results shown communities are willing and interested to participate in program by government. It is because communities believe their participation in local government can improve their own ability and skills as well as promotes the local government efficiency. In short, this previous study showed that participation of communities is important to promoting

the efficiency of local government programs.

Further, the initiative of local government to empower women citizens is appointed women as local councillor members and Village Development and Security Committee (JKKK). This initiative is part of strategies by local government to meet expectation of Malaysian government to allocate 30% women as decision makers (UNDP, 2006). By participate at decision making level allows women to represent gender reposniveness and particpotary budgeting. Women representatives are in the positions of bridge quality of services provided by local government and public needs that leads to public trust and satisfaction (Wang & Wart, 2007; Zakaria, Zakaria, Noordin & Sawal, 2010).

In general, women community recorded high scores towards the best way to appoint the councilors of local government. Women community also agreed that council members should have training from time to time. Councilors are an important individual in local government and training can increase their effectiveness to play their role to communities. Other than that, electoral system seen as effective system to appoint councilors and this system got high agreement among women community. Nevertheless, community felt that the current selection of councilors is not fair and transparent. Results obtained from the current study is parallel with what reported by Gaynor, Mokwena and Richards (2010) in their study which stated that councilors need training to be able to determine council decisions better, good understanding of legislation, understand submissions made by administrators and have some basic literacy and numeracy skills. Previous research also found that councilors accused of not performing their duties honestly for residents interest. It was suggested that councilor should be given more educational supporting programs and training to encourage them to be accountable and follow the rules. Through this emphasis, the performance of councilors would be improved, and build upon the trust from residents. Other than that, training for developing budgets and financial management is important to ensure that they are able to manage finances.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown the level of accountability in local government perceived by women community as satisfied in the present aspects of the variables studied. Although the results showed that most of the women community were satisfied with accountability in local government today, the management should further evaluate in details component of accountability in management to enhance women participation in local development programme. In particular, local governments have to create various platform for women to bring society voice in local decision making programme. By having strong voice in local government decision making would lead

to reduce social problems and raising awareness to contribute more in community development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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