

Cross-Cultural Management and Workplace Challenges for Women Managers in Pakistan: Exploring the Realities from an Emic Perspective

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Received: February 24 2014

Accepted: March 27 2014

ABSTRACT

The influx of modern organizations in the local economy of Pakistan has brought many opportunities for women. This phenomenon though has created challenges for women employees especially women managers to manage workforce socialized on highly gender specific norms. There is reasonable scholarship available on this topic though no academic research is conducted on this issue from an emic perspective. This paper focuses on this glitch in the literature and explores the challenges faced by women managers in the service sector firms from an emic perspective. Qualitative research methodology has been employed and in-depth insight on the topic at hand was acquired to meet the target of this research. The study explored that women managers face different subtle and obvious societal and organizational challenges that includes the token position, glass ceiling, glass wall, harassment, unavailability of networking and mentoring relations.

KEY WORDS: Women managers, Cross-cultural context, Emic perspective, Challenges, Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary organizations of Pakistan, the top management likes to present an image of promoting gender equality [1] despite the prevailing cultural trends of gender segregation [2]. Actually, these organizations try to develop international standard organizations in the local market by following western especially the North American human resource management practices based on individualism, equality and gender egalitarianism [3]. Despite the conflicting workplace culture, women today are entering the labour force. However, they are also confronting with structural challenges at organizational level. ILO (International Labor Organization) reported reveals that the rate of women progress within managerial ranks is slow, uneven and sometimes dispiriting [4]. Therefore, women managers' proportion at middle-level management is higher than their representation at senior level management [5] which subject women in the vertical occupation segregation.

Scholarships also reveal that women managers also experience horizontal occupational segregation, with more likely to work as managers in pink collar fields in staff support role [6]. Kauser and Tlaiss figured out that women face structural barriers including discriminatory recruitment and promotions practices favouring men for managerial positions especially on middle and senior positions [7]. Less representation of women in the organization gives them token position. The status of women as token position in the organization therefore weakens the authority of women in the organization. Goheer contends that "the modern cosmetic ting of equality", though shows number of women in the labour market but it sometime positively discriminate women because the interest of patriarchal system still work behind the scene which maintains the status quo" [8]. Majority of men in the organization with ultimate power and authority are less likely to accept women as equally positioned colleagues. Kauser and Tlaiss further defined it as male dominated hierarchies and manifestation of power which isolate women from the main stream activities and power net works in the organization [7]. These networks are male domains and women's virtual exclusion from their networks deprives them from professional support, career planning and access to key personnel and organizational information [9]. Furthermore woman's role as a manager becomes critical when she has to supervise men to achieve organizational goals. Shah contends that men in Pakistani society find it hard to accept women in the positions of authority even in a professional context, which suggests home-to-job transferring of role relationships [5]. Men's dominance in the domestic setting is replayed in the 'public'.

Budhwar and associates also depict that woman managers have to deal with the male ego which is viewed as serious barrier to women's up-ward growth on the managerial ladder [10]. When women managers order men in general and to older men in particular, they feel emotionally challenged. Chuma and Ncube contend that women's performance on managerial position is often jeopardized by their male colleagues especially the older colleagues as they feel insecure from women and consider managerial positions as their right [11]. In patriarchal societies, gender power relation actually restrains women to associate themselves with male colleagues and lead them from the front in the organization. Women's capabilities are less appreciated. Women are evaluated according to cultural conception of gender roles [12]. And interestingly women managers

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face more retaliation and denial of their authority from women colleagues as they are accustomed to dealing with male managers [13].

Women managers around the world also face glass ceiling which is defined as those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevents qualified individuals from advancing upward onto managerial positions [14]. Women managers are held back in terms of exercise of duty and performance [11]. Naqvi also highlights that surely “more and more women in Pakistan are entering the workforce today, though their growth is more horizontal than vertical” [15].

Women managers are deprived of formal access to opportunities of growth and development such as training and education [7] due to their weak representation in organizational power hierarchy. Ultimately this results in their lower access to informal power as a result of their exclusion from informal organizational networks. Kanter's theory of sex discrimination, the structural characteristics of the organization such as the length of career ladder, number of male-dominated hierarchical levels support men's rather than women's career advancement [16]. Exclusion from old boy's network further denies women from informal opportunities such as mentoring and peer support. Networking is taken as an advantage of sharing vital information, strategizing and planning career, increased visibility and offering professional support to women [17]. In a similar context, mentoring interaction can also help women towards the advancement of their career to top management position because it provides women with emotional support to enhance their career.

Across the globe, sexual harassment is increasingly recognized by organizations as a management and leadership problem for women [11]. Sexual harassment is major problem faced by the Nigerian women possibly reflecting patriarchal attitude to those women who have ventured into the public sphere [18, 19]. Khawar connects it with lower representation of women at managerial position in the organization in Pakistan [20].

RESEARCH METHOD

The overview of the literature showed that women manager faces various subtle as well as obvious challenges on organizational and societal level around the world [1]. This research aims to reveal the challenges experienced by women managers in Pakistan on organizational and societal level. The empirical data was collected through an in-depth qualitative investigation in service sector firms in Islamabad. In line with exploratory nature of the research semi-structured inter-view guideline was used to get an insight of the topic at hand.

After extensive review of literature, the initial themes were drawn and classified into different categories for examples token position of women in the organization, glass ceiling, wall glass, male ego, work-family balance, networking and mentoring relation. Purposive sampling technique was used as recommended by Walter to gather data when researchers are clear about purpose of the study and aware of their target population [21]. In this study we also wanted to target only the women managers who were difficult to be located through government statistic. The interviewees (all females) were from different service sector firms in the city of Islamabad. Twenty (20) in- depth interviews were conducted in Urdu language from female managers. On average each interview lasted for 50-60 minutes, though in some cases the interview took 120 minutes. Thematic analysis has been applied to comprehend the findings according to the theoretical framework.

For analysing the existing data, we conducted deductive qualitative content analysis as proposed by Leedy and Ormrod [22]. The themes were generated and coded after an extensive study of the literature. Then, the data received from the respondents was coded. The responses of the respondents also helped to develop new themes and sequencing these themes. Selected quotes from these interviews are used to support both findings and discussion of the results. Some of the quotes are also included in the research for further clarity. The name of the organizations and the respondents are not revealed for confidentiality reason.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Women Managers

According to the respondents, many organizations are hiring women on priority in order to show gender equality but this equality is just of numbers as it is highlighted by Goheer [8]. Whereas in actual women do not enjoy similar status at work place as they are only taken on women oriented departments and positions. It was highlighted by many respondents that men strategically select those women who were shy, unassertive and not compatible enough to challenge their domains. Many woman managers consider these women as more challenging for them than men because they didn't represent women's real issues and concerns at top level. Their representation mostly reflected dominated group's interests and their opinion was taken as for granted.

“They (organization or management) just do with the numbers, and the numbers only represents quiet, shy, incompatible women to maintain the hierarchy of power/authority (of men's), because first, to complete the number and second who don't challenge men's authority. It is never the true representation of women”.

Respondents viewed that this situation further grants men with power and authority in the organization. They expose their power when they feel that women are giving tough competition. Therefore, women who perform better usually face more tough time in the organizations and they are isolated in the department to make them weak as discussed by Kauser and Tlaiss [7]. Women managers viewed that male especially older male colleagues do not let women grow not only vertically but also horizontally.

"It is my experience that during meetings usually men don't accept women's opinions as open heartedly as of other male colleagues. My opinion or suggestion is always put into more questions than my male colleague. Always leave an impression that men are more analytical and critical in tough situations".

Respondents pointed out that isolated women are usually uninformed about the opportunities and important tasks where they are not only discriminated by their upper management but also from their colleagues and administrative staff. This phenomenon is termed as glass wall by Amos-Wilson [23]. One of the respondents shared that,

"It is always difficult for men to include a woman in their circle. It becomes more challenging for them when their competitor is a woman. They try to isolate women from major events and assignments. Most of the times, they don't share important official matters and information intentionally with women and give them more difficult assignments to check their capabilities, performance and management abilities. Men never let women to know what opportunities come (they usually hide the notification or circulate it to their own circle only)."

According to respondents power relations also affect woman to woman relations in the organization. Women's positions are often impaired due to their weak interconnectedness of women to women in order to be in the power circle. This action may be good at individual level but unfavourable for the women managers as a whole.

"I think women managers can do better if they stay united, but most of the time I feel that we lack self confidence and depend on others. I have my colleague who intentionally try to connect herself with men's network to get insight, though to some extent she is successful but to work on men's terms is another big challenge for women".

Similarly, respondents further viewed that women can't identify the exclusionary strategies in the organization. The organizational structure is often considered as standard which one way or the other advantage men at the cost of women. For example Women are intentionally kept away from the strategic assignments [11], unfair and influenced performance appraisal procedure. Women managers also highlighted that there is clear difference in the process of bonuses such as there is parents' death leave for employees and family allowance, the rule is not applicable for women. As one of the respondents explained,

"When my father died, I applied for leave and allowance, but my application was rejected because I was not liable for the stipend. However, men are availing the leave and stipend. The difference is that women in our society are considered for reproductive role and men for productive, they are breadwinner and it's the son who carries the name of the parent. The similar pattern is observed in the organization."

Respondents further highlighted sexual harassment as challenge for women managers. They pointed out that women's managerial position do not exempt them from harassment [11]. Respondents expressed that their behaviour/actions are critically observed and evaluated. With whom they interact, what was the physical distance during interaction, and even their words and gestures are observed and evaluated critically. It was shared by most of the respondents that despite maintaining personal and professional integrity, this makes them vulnerable in this situation. But they can't report such incidents despite the anti-harassment policies and rules in the organization. Because these policies and rules are hardly practiced and decision and action on such cases are intentionally delayed. Respondents viewed that the notion of family's respect and honor which was directly affected by women's social mobility, interaction with (non-kin) men and modesty [24] restrict women to report such incidents. They highlighted that

"My colleagues were the first who were making an attempt. I remember when I was parking my car, they were sitting right beside the window and the first SMS I was receiving from them was "Welcome". Isn't it amazing/harassing that you are welcomed in your own office everyday (she shared this with a sigh). They were intentionally making an attempt to harass me".

Similarly,

"Once I experienced sever harassment in the form of public shouting and personalized comments. I reported the event to the senior management, interestingly rather than taking an action, he suggested me to write an application and then recommended that application to the president of academic association. This action of the senior further added to my grief rather than providing me a relief. The lesson I learnt was to compose myself and did not expect any support from the system, senior management and even from colleagues in case of an accident."

Mostly respondents disclosed that male colleagues exhibited prejudice against the women supervisors who interacted closely with her colleagues and staff. Study of Kattara found the similar findings [13]. Female professionals were more respected when they interacted according to local cultural values of gender avoidance and limited interaction. Otherwise they are scandalized. They have to interacted primarily within a specific social group based on the similarities of gender, caste, ethnic, or regional affiliations.

According to respondents, unavailability of networks inhibit women from different promotional opportunities in organization despite better performances as they are not member of close male social networks. One of the interviewees highlighted it in this way that as a woman manager she had less influence on her staff as compare her male colleagues at the same position because he, being the member of an informal social network, can support his workers more than her.

The data of the study revealed that balancing work-family role was one of the serious challenges that women face. Respondents expressed their deep concern that they had to level these challenges alone. Women managers cannot leave both roles in either ways. Women's primary role is considered in the family but as manager they have to give equal time and attention to professional roles. As one of the respondents said that,

"As a manager I give full attention to my work, but I do not forget that I am also a mother and I have some responsibilities regarding my family. Sometime it becomes very tough because managerial role is very demanding, we have to spend long hours in the office, and to attend meetings (as a crucial part of their job). So it is really difficult to manage the balance between the personal and professional roles."

The respondent highlighted that support of family members especially husband can help them to balance the dual role demands. But Pakistani men even if supported women, would not help to manage domestic chores because they would face severe criticism from their family. One respondent openly shared:

"My husband though doesn't put objection on my job or movement, but he does not support me in my household responsibilities. He has a typical Pakistani man's ego. We have equal post and salary but he always want me to manage household responsibilities and never joined to handle the work pressures. He wants me to give full attention to family and especially to kids."

Respondents however, expressed that with changing society, women have to manage these challenges as they have to progress in their career too. Most of the women viewed that they manage these challenges on personal and professional levels while maintaining the cultural demands of the Pakistani society.

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to explore the challenges faced by the female managers in the context of service sector firms in Pakistan. This study is unique because it gives an in-depth insight about the challenges women managers faced in the contemporary organizations. The research has some limitations mainly because the results are based on the opinion of few women managers in the service sector firms in Islamabad. Since, Islamabad is the capital city, therefore challenges that women managers face here might be different in its intensity and sensitivity. Therefore one should be vigilant in generalizing the findings. Future research could take into account the diversity in service sector firms through quantitative study.

Findings showed that women have double edge pressure of managing these expectations in order to survive in the market. Women on leading positions in this organization experience tokenism and isolated as it witnessed in India [25]. These women not only experience barriers to move upward (the phenomenon of glass ceiling) but also face problem to develop horizontally (phenomenon of glass wall) mentioned by Amos-Wilson [24]. Women have limited access to male social networks that are sources of information, opportunity and influence and play major roles in the organizational life.

Furthermore the data disclosed that despite the legal authority, women heads and supervisors exercise less formal authority and more personalized ways of handling situation. Research findings also unleashed that there is more interference in the departments and teams headed by women rather than men. women managers are not included in the male networks despite the support and favours to male colleagues. Consistently, these women remained less informed and isolated. The in-depth insight provided by this paper can be used to develop

effective diversity management program in Pakistan. This paper can also be helpful to international as well as national managers to comprehend women issues at workplace in Pakistani organizations and develop strategies to effectively incorporate women into the mainstream activities in the contemporary organizations.

Acknowledgment:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in this research.

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