SOCIAL FACTORS AND WOMEN'S CAREER ADVANCEMENT TO SENIOR MANAGEMENT POSITION IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This paper explored the under-representation of women in senior leadership and management positions within the universities of Pakistan with particular focus on identifying social constraints and barriers to the appointment of women to the top. In line with the international agenda in curtailing gender imbalances in senior positions, the study has practical value as stereotypes and traditional attitudes towards women are found to be amongst the main constraints that obstruct their way to the top positions. These societal constraints create gender divisions in practice which perpetuate occupational segregation. Ignorance of women's equal rights makes people reluctant to accept women's management roles. Without a positive change of attitudes and social mind-sets, a significant increase in women's status will not occur. Senior women's perceptions of the difficulties they faced hopefully will enable these insights to be brought to a wider audience and influence change. Such knowledge can improve the management of women's human resources and their careers globally. This might appear as a clear approach for policy makers for countering the issue of the dearth of women in senior management positions.

Keywords: Career progression, Pakistan, Organizational factors, Women.

1. Introduction

The shortage of executive women is a global issue (Catalyst, 2012). Despite having increased their enrollment in higher education, (Nidiffer, 2010; Morley, 2013) the number of women comparatively falls short in the very highest positions (Adler & Izraeli, 1988; Wirth, 2001; Davidson & Burke, 2004; Madsen, 2012).

Women hold very few senior management positions in the Pakistan as well (Mirza & Jabeen, 2011; Shah & Shah, 2012). Comparatively, women's share of professional jobs has increased, generally, it is the teaching profession which is dominated by women (Shah & Shah, 2012) as is worldwide (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Shakeshaft, 2006).

Generally there are a number of complex factors obstructing women's advancement in leadership and management including gendered attitudes (Vinkenburg & Van, 2005); gender discrimination (Blackmore, 1999; Bendl & Schmidt, 2010); the exclusion of women from male developmental networks (Tharenou, 2005); and the exclusion of women from career development opportunities (Morley, 2006).

Davidson and Burke, (2011, p. 11) suggest that "women still face discrimination and gender, ethnic, cultural and religious stereotyping; there is continuing male domination at senior-management and corporate board levels". Ahmad (2001) and Oke (2003) suggest that women's career progression is hindered by the social environment, legal and institutional structures, unequal employment opportunities, work-life balance and restricted access to professional

development opportunities associated with economic resources. In Asian contexts like India and Pakistan, while avenues for work are now increasingly open for women, they still have to fight against gender bias to gain acceptance as equals (Mirza & Jabeen, 2011).

So when considering the status of women in management positions, it is important to acknowledge the importance of social constraints to women's career progression. Because to tackle this constraint extended efforts are required in all forums to transform these attitudes and to overcome traditional stereotypes and lessen the division of male and female at work. The fundamental need under National Education Policies, must be to make the Quranic principles and true Islamic practices a vital part of the national curriculum at all level so that the message of the Holy Quran and Hadith for woman's equal rights and their position in Islam can be disseminated in the process of education and training.

2. Review of the relevant literature

Many authors have shown that the existence and persistence of stereotypical cultural practices and socialization and gender biases explain the poor representation of women in senior management roles (Curry, 2000; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Embry, Padget & Caldwell, 2008; Shah, 2009; Shah & Shah, 2012).

The Catalyst survey (2002, 2007) persistently found stereotypes - preconceptions of women's roles. Vinkenburg and Van, (2005) suggest that gender biases were the most frequent barriers to women's advancement. Coleman (2011) also verified that 'gendered attitudes' play a crucial role in women's career progression (p. 174) and strongly support women's childcare and domestic responsibilities (Fu & Shaffer, 2001; Lee, Um & Kim, 2004; Hewlett, Luce & West, 2005), whereas men have been given the role of breadwinner (Snow, Swan & Raghavan, 2003; Duxbury & Higgins, 2005). Particularly in a highly patriarchal society, it is less likely that many women will acquire the skills, training and competencies necessary for professional and management positions (Jabeen & Jadoon, 2008). In Pakistani society, Shah and Shah (2012) have also confirmed that women's participation outside the home and their access to senior management positions is governed by societal belief systems.

Other research has provided evidence that these traditional stereotypes of women and men predominate in work settings particularly in relation to the upper level management positions (Schein, 2001) and have a strong impact on women's' career development (Forster, 2001; Buddhapriya, 2009). For example, Moorosi (2000, p. 7) notes how an ingrained societal perspective which maintains that "a woman's place is in the home" has contributed to the exclusion of women from senior management positions and causes gender inequality in society. Blackmore, Thomson and Barty (2006) suggest that there is a huge impact of this perception on women's access and entry into positions of top management. From the Pakistani perspective, Jabeen and Jadoon (2008) suggest that cultural and social beliefs, attitudes and practices prevent girls from benefitting from educational opportunities and subsequently in gaining access to top managerial positions.

While many researchers have asserted that gender role stereotypes miscalculate and under-represent women's actual qualities and capabilities and continue to manipulate decisions regarding women's promotion and advancement to senior management (Blackmore, 1999; Mann, 2009; Binns & Kerfoot, 2011; Hoobler, Lemmon & Wayne, 2011). Professional women persistently find themselves surrounded by such perceptions (Bardoel et al., 2011).

Mann (2009) argue that men are considered to be more forceful, assertive, aggressive, confident, independent, rational and task-oriented, whereas women are perceived as more

nurturing, emotional, considerate, submissive, affectionate, indecisive and people oriented. Zulu (2003) associates this with socialization that starts in early childhood where boys and girls are taught to behave in what are perceived as gender appropriate ways. As a result, women often receive less favourable recommendations for positions of power and authority in organizations and this adversely affects the career opportunities of women managers (Coleman, 2000; Shah & Shah, 2012).

This study was designed to build on existing research exploring women's perceptions of societal factors contributing to success and acting as barriers to women's advancement to senior management positions. The specific research question was:

What major constraints do women face at societal level to their advancement to senior management positions?

3. Methodology

In depth, semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were undertaken with 48 women working in junior and senior level management positions in the public sector universities. Thirty women in senior university management positions including those who were married, single, with/without children working in cadre/basic pay scale (BPS) 18 and above. Eighteen younger women working in cadre/ BPS 17 were interviewed.

The participants in the focus group were a group of six senior and junior participants from a conference being held on that day. They belonged to one of the sample universities.

4. Data analysis

The analysis of the participants' responses consistently showed that they had difficulties in their career progression as they faced negative attitudes and societal beliefs in numerous subtle ways that had the effect of constraining their progression in management careers. The theme societal constraints along with its sub-themes are discussed in the following sections with descriptive examples taken from the participants:

The influence of patriarchal societal practices on women's professional career and progression to management positions

The research revealed that 65.5 percent of participants faced barriers to their career progression as a result of the patriarchal system. Participants referred to patriarchy, in terms of men taking

primary responsibility for the wellbeing and comfort of the family as a whole. Therefore, financial power was mostly in the hands of men. Since the financial authority mainly rested with male members of the family the participants suggested that culturally women's employment was not appreciated and generally women were not encouraged to work outside of the home. Men were expected to provide for the family financially. The participants elaborated:

> "It is a social stigma that women need not work. Culturally, it is not appreciated that a woman as a sister, daughter and wife may earn and take care of financial matters […]. Home is defined as the best place for her where she performs her role as a mother and wife. A man dominates the world outside the home and performs his role as a breadwinner […]. It is man's duty to finance his family […].This is the turning point from where men take advantage to consider themselves as the head of the family […]"
> (Focus group)

The patriarchal nature of Pakistani society presented barriers to women in gaining key positions in organizations, despite the fact they were given due respect in their homes. These embedded beliefs about gender roles limited women's potential to aspire to senior management positions.

The multicultural nature of Pakistani society led to a range of influences which ignored historical traditional values presenting challenges to women in pursuing leadership positions.

Preconceived ideas about appropriate gender specific jobs which resulted in occupational segregation

Generally, women did not have a choice relating to their preferences or aptitudes. The majority of the participants (58.3%) indicated that women's access to education had brought about a certain level of change in societal attitudes and developed acceptance of their outside work but there were still many people who did not approve of women working with men.

 The participants emphasized that the most supported job for women was that of teaching, because this was best suited to family life. Teaching hours were best matched with children's schooling. The majority of time could be devoted to childcare alongside work responsibilities. This was not possible in management positions. A senior interviewee reported:

> *"People are in the habit of seeing women in the teaching profession [...] I have heard people, particularly women, saying that teaching is the only job that leaves a woman some time for herself and her family as it carries flexible working hours, unlike other jobs. It is not time consuming therefore this is the best profession for women. Men always endorse this idea" [...]*
>
> *(Focus group)*

The findings suggested that stereotypes and perceptions of Pakistani women in society had a significant negative impact on the place of women in management positions. Historically, a few occupations were regarded as highly prestigious for them such as doctors or the teaching profession. Over time, the range had broadened to include a wider range of jobs. Nevertheless, in Pakistani society, there were strong traditional social expectations where women were still believed to be suited for medicine or teaching.

The Influence of preconceived ideas for gender specific jobs on women's career progression

Fifty two percent of the participants believed that preconceived ideas relating to gender specific jobs impacted on women's career progression. The participants indicated that they received resistance from colleagues, particularly in the early years of their career, for accepting or applying for management positions. This was regarded as a major challenge to career success. A senior participant shared her experiences of beginning of her career:

> *"When I joined university there were no women working in management positions. ...It was very difficult for them to accept me [...]. Many hurdles were created to my promotion [...] Despite my eligibility, for a long time, I could not get due promotions [...]" (Senior, Interviewee)*

Social attitudes towards gender specific jobs emerged as one of the most significant constraints toward women's progression to senior management positions. It appeared that stereotypical images of a leader being male could create a challenging situation for women's career progression.

The influence of stereotypes relating to women's abilities and management style on women's career progression

The majority of participants (62.5%) expressed concerns regarding social stereotypes about women's abilities and management style. Social stereotypes generally assumed that males were successful in leadership positions whereas success for women in senior positions was considered less optimistic as they were not expected to be firm in challenging positions. One of the participants reported the behaviour of male members of an official committee as follows:

> *"When I was appointed as Head of an Institute [...] while attending an initial meetings for campus development [...] I heard one of the male members of that meeting say, let's wait, and 'see when this Institute collapses." (Senior Interviewee)*

The research showed that there was a societal perception that men are better for handling top management positions than women. Participants argued that there was a misconception that leadership qualities were gender specific. However, such stereotypes had a harmful effect on women's careers consigning women to secondary roles.

Perceptions of the lack of importance of women developing a professional career

Given the expectation that Pakistani woman should to be dedicated to domestic life, 45.8 percent of the participants indicated that they found limitations for their career in the structural systems of society where women' professional careers were not considered to be of much importance. Parents were interested in girls' education but not in their jobs. One of the participants commented:

> *"I was not allowed to join medical college. Initially, I was not allowed to avail myself of a scholarship because we were six sisters and our father wanted all of us to get married. They thought Master's level education was enough for us to live a respectable life... [...]" (Junior Interviewee)*

The societal attitudes of those who held traditional beliefs regarding the ideal roles of women, had a great influence on women's careers. There was no emphasis on the importance of women having an occupation. Consequently, women were not encouraged to develop their professional capabilities.

Social constraints on activities and the mobility of women

In addition to these societal stereotypes, the factors that prevented women from top positions were constraints on their activities and mobility. Thirty one percent of the participants experienced mobility constraints in their career. The need for women to be able to move around to pursue their careers was not accepted. While the interviewees indicated that the situation had changed over time and women were now allowed to work outside the home from morning until evening, it was still difficult for them to travel alone. For this reason women were left with no option, except to take available positions in the specific areas where they could easily commute from their homes.

One of the senior participants raised this as an issue faced by her female subordinates, because they were often unable to participate in professional development activities taking place outside the city. Their parents did not permit them to go alone. Their work activities were mainly limited to the city where they lived. Subsequently, they lagged behind their male colleagues:

> "*I have in my office both male and female subordinates. Whenever, opportunities for professional development arise [...].I try to recommend my female colleagues. Unfortunately, they give me a typical response [...]. I cannot go to so and so places to attend the professional development workshop because my mother will not let me go alone*" (Senior Interviewee)

It appeared that women had limited options and choices in managing their career progression as they were constrained by a range of traditional values even though they were qualified for promotion. There were also challenges relating to geographical location. These issues were persistent and their existence was justified as the continuation and endorsement of cultural and regional values which acted as barriers to women's careers.

Conclusion

The findings from this study suggest that the socio-cultural context impacts women's career advancement in different ways. The participants experienced stereotypical beliefs, with regard to gender roles constituted hidden constraints to women's career progression.

Gender-role stereotypes and attitudes towards women's career selection did influence women's own career choices leading many to choose teaching over management positions. The reality of women's roles made women less comfortable with management positions.

The participants also perceived Pakistan's patriarchal culture as a barrier to their career prospects. They identified inconsistency between beliefs and practices including conflict between people's personal beliefs and societal norms and beliefs. Participants were confident that Islam itself did not present restrictions that might impede the career development of women, but that the restrictions were societal. The traditional social system and views about the roles of men and women limited women's' career choices and created occupational segregation.

There was also an assumption that women were less capable of being senior managers. There was also a societal belief that women required protection which limited their mobility and career development activities. Rural women, in particular, had more restricted choices and experienced more societal obstacles to their careers than those living in the towns or cities.

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