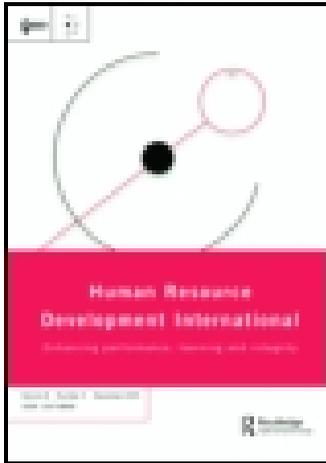


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Asian women in top management: eight country cases

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Asian women in top management: eight country cases

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This article is a by-product of an innovative session of the 2014 Asia Chapter of the Academy of Human Resource Development conference, Seoul, South Korea, where eight female researchers with roots in eight Asian countries (in alphabetical order: China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand) presented on the topic of Asian women in top management. In this article, we present these presenters' perspectives on the topic, including their current state of working conditions and balancing of personal and professional lives. We asked them the following three questions: (1) Do traditional values/religious beliefs limit or liberate women in management? (2) How have social views on the role of women in management changed in your country? (3) What organizational and social changes are necessary for women to advance to leadership positions? We also encouraged them to go beyond answering these three questions. Additionally, we discuss convergence (commonalities) and divergence (differences) across these eight Asian countries.

Keywords: women in top management; Asia; gender equality

Asia has made enormous economic strides in the past few decades. Women, however, have not gained sufficient attention. Gender inequality and underutilization of female talent are deeply rooted and widely spread in many parts of Asia. The recent WEF (2014) *Gender Gap Report* ranked China 87th, India 114th, Japan 104th, Korea 117th, Malaysia 107th, Sri Lanka 79th, and Thailand 61st out of 142 countries in the combined evaluation of economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment in terms of women's status compared with male counterparts. Asia's gender gap indices are highly disappointing, given that the region is rapidly and continuously developing.

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Notes: After listing the first two authors, the remaining authors are listed alphabetically. Iratrachar Amornpipat on Thailand, Wei-Wen Chang on Taiwan, Gertrude I. Hewapathirana on Sri Lanka, Mayuko Horimoto on Japan, Mimi Miyoung Lee on South Korea, Jessica Li on China, Nisha N. Manikoth on India, and Jamilah Othman and Siti Raba'ah Hamzah on Malaysia.

Cultures affect values and perceptions, prototypes, and styles of leadership (Jonsen, Maznevski, and Schneider 2010). We acknowledge that our research context, Asia, is different, in many ways, from Western countries where the majority of studies on women in leadership have been conducted (Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Groysberg and Abrahams 2014; Marvin et al. 2014; Munn 2013). Appointing women to high-ranking leadership roles in Asia is extremely challenging because traditional cultural and religious beliefs (e.g., Confucianism) dictate the inferior status of women in their daily lives (Kim 2011; Kim and Rowley 2009). Although women are a great reservoir of quality work, they have been an underdeveloped human capital. Women's participation in economic activities has resulted in promoting their social status, but some cultural traditions remain unchanged, especially in family structures and interactions. Women's roles as mothers and wives are still strongly upheld as the fundamental duty for women in many parts of Asia.

As the meanings of work and family vary from culture to culture (Aryee, Fields, and Luk 1999; Yang et al. 2000), there is an immediate need to consider cultural differences more significantly when researching women in leadership. In the United States, for instance, the main purpose of work is to further one's personal career (Shaffer, Joplin, and Hsu 2011). However, for people from more collectivist cultures, as in Asia, the purpose of work is quite often 'a means of supporting the family' (Lee, Chang, and Kim 2011, 2035) or 'raising children well' (Cho et al. 2015, 14). Without a clear understanding of what research constructs mean in a focused context, we cannot automatically apply Western findings to an Asian context.

This article is a by-product of an innovative session of the 2014 Asia Chapter of the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) conference, Seoul, where eight female researchers with roots in eight Asian countries (in alphabetical order: China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand) presented on the topic of Asian women in top management. In this article, we present our co-authors' perspectives on the topic, including their current state of working conditions and balancing of personal and professional lives. Additionally, we discuss convergence (commonalities) and divergence (differences) across these eight Asian countries.

We asked our co-authors the following three questions: (1) Do traditional values/religious beliefs limit or liberate women in management? (2) How have social views on the role of women in management changed in your country? (3) What organizational and social changes are necessary for women to advance to leadership positions? We also encouraged them to go beyond answering these three questions. We present each individual's response in alphabetical order by country.

China

China has been in the news for its rapid economic development for more than three decades. However, the economic development and the improvement of social equality do not necessarily go hand in hand, in this case, as gender equality in China has lagged behind (Burkitt 2013; Cooke 2013). To examine the current status of women in top management in China, three topics were touched upon, including: (1) the current status of women in top management, (2) the influence of traditional values and beliefs on women leaders, and (3) strategies for organizations to advance women in leadership positions.

The current status of women in top management

A study by the GTIBR (2013) projects a picture of prominent roles played by women in Chinese companies. The study suggested that women hold 51% of senior management positions in China compared with an average of 24% in other parts of the world. Of these women in senior management, 19% hold the title of CEO, more than double the global average of 8%. In another set of data reported by Shi (2012), women led 123 (15%) of 802 companies in 2011. Of 305 newly listed companies, women controlled 62 (20%) companies.

An interesting fact, however, as pointed out by Zhang (2012), is that most women CEOs in Chinese companies are either the founder of the company or heirs by default (inherited the company from their powerful fathers). In addition, the ratio of women participants in leadership teams in non-State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) is higher than that of SOEs that are often large in size and better supported by the government. Non-SOEs vary in size and are either private, foreign-owned, or joint ventures.

Female participation in the country's political bodies shows a slightly different picture. The percentage of female participation decreases as the power of the political body increases. The 18th National Congress consists of 23% female members; the Central Committee, the party's decision-making body, has just 6%; and the Politburo Standing Committee has yet to have a female member. BBC's BB (2012) quoted a Chinese professor as saying that women's political participation has been lopsided, and China's ranking in global female political participation has slipped from 12th in 1975 to 64th in 2012. To increase female participation in the political decision-making process, China has implemented a proactive quota system that demands the number of women to be placed in leadership positions in government departments (Zeng 2014). In 2010, there were 86.2% of government departments that offered leadership positions to women, which is an increase of 26% since 2000. People, however, are concerned that such a quota system has become a factor that hinders the continuous growth of participation by women (Zeng 2014).

Increasing female participation in top management in business organizations and governmental political bodies alone cannot resolve gender inequality in China. There are other indicators of gender equality, including equal political rights, working rights, property rights, and equal rights in marriage, family, education, and other social domains (Moghadam and Senftova 2005). There is a lack of female participation in local and grass-roots political organizations (Zeng 2014), and discrimination in employment practices, recruiting, promotion, and job assignments still remains (Cooke 2013).

The influence of traditional and contemporary values and beliefs

As China is a patriarchal society and its cultural value system is often credited to the historical influence of Confucian ideology, gender roles are stereotyped, and men and women are raised to adopt stereotypical roles to be socially accepted. Men are expected to engage in behaviours that emphasize masculinity, such as being in charge, dominance, and achievement. Women are expected to be nurturing, deferent, and affiliative (Liu 2013). As a result, women are not only discouraged from pursuing leadership positions but are also generally believed to be less likely than men to possess leadership qualities (Cooke 2013).

In Chinese contemporary history, gender equality is touted to be one of the key policy successes of the communist party. A series of laws and regulations were established to protect Chinese women's social status and rights when the People's Republic of China

was founded in 1949. The popular phrase uttered by Man Zedong, the first president of China, ‘Women hold up half the sky,’ summarizes the sentiment at that time. There were signs of participation of women in different sectors of the society and in leadership positions. Although there are debates about the effectiveness of those laws and regulations, when measured against gender equality indicators established by western societies (e.g., Moghadam and Senftova [2005]), many women felt liberated. However, since the economic reform in the 1980s, employers are granted greater autonomy in operating their business, and post-socialist ideological pragmatism is on the rise (Cooke 2013). The laws and regulations for gender equality that worked in the state sectors in the planned economic system prior to the reform have eroded. Many organizations that have emerged since the reform have not had equal opportunity policies and/or career development policies.

Traditional values are taking hold again in today’s China. A survey by All-China Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics of China (cited in Zeng 2014) reported that 62.1% of men and 54.6% of women surveyed agreed with the statement that husbands should deal with external matters and wives should look after home life. Although most couples are dual earners with similar educational backgrounds, it is normal for a husband’s career to take precedence over that of his wife (Cooke 2013). These traditional values undermine women’s aspirations to pursue leadership positions and have resulted in the low presence of women in management positions in China.

Strategies for organizations to advance and sustain women in leadership positions

Gender bias in organizations can hinder women’s aspirations and interrupt the developmental cycle for women to advance towards top management positions (Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb 2013). Diverse management teams have proved to produce better performance (GTIBR 2013). It is in the best interest of organizations to forge a culture that promotes gender equality. First, organizations might consider establishing equal opportunity policies that would clear the path for women in the process of recruitment and promotion. Second, organizations should establish career development and succession planning programmes that consider gender equality. Third, they need to develop potential women leaders through training, mentoring, challenging projects, and networks. Fourth, they can develop HR policies that support work-life balance and provide flexible working options to support more participation by women. Finally, organizations have to reshape a corporate culture that would provide a more welcoming environment for women (Liu 2013).

India

India, with a population of over 1.2 billion, is the most populous country in the world after China. Women constitute 48.5% of the population of India, which is around 8.5% of the world’s population, making the role of women in India significant. India has had a female President and Prime Minister, while 65% of countries around the globe have had no female head of state in the past 50 years.

However, 67 years after becoming an independent nation, statistics on women’s participation in education, government and the labour force portray an unimpressive picture. Only 55% of women are literate compared to 77% of men (Indiastat 2011). According to the WEF (2014) Global Gender Gap Report, India ranks 126th in terms of women’s educational attainment and 134th in economic participation out of 142 participating countries. India also had the lowest national female labour force among Asian

countries (Francesco and Mahtani 2011). It is no surprise that India was in the bottom 10 countries with respect to women in top management, with women occupying only 14% of the senior management positions. Even the number of women in junior positions was the lowest among Asian countries (Francesco and Mahtani 2011). Weak numbers in female participation and its spillover effect on the women leadership pipeline put India at a serious disadvantage.

Traditional gender roles of women

Indian society expects a woman to be a dutiful wife, a demure daughter-in-law, and a devoted mother. In raising daughters, parents are primarily concerned with having them married. Even if daughters are provided a good education, it is often with the intention of making them more suitable for an ideal husband. For a married woman, the responsibility of taking care of her in-laws is considered paramount. Women who choose to have a career must juggle roles of a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother with demands at work. Many women quit working when they have children because of the emotional and physical burden of trying to balance work and family.

Changes in the role of women

In spite of cultural norms, there has been a significant shift in the last few decades, signalling a new, urban career-oriented Indian woman. There are some factors that have contributed to this fundamental change.

Education

Girls are choosing an education in professional fields, such as computer science, management, engineering, and law. They are entering the workforce and taking on jobs that are impactful, satisfying, and well paying.

Family support

Men are making adjustments and supporting their wives to accommodate the needs of a dual-career family. In addition, women are receiving encouragement from their families. The joint family system, an arrangement prevalent in India, where an extended family of many generations share residence (Eames 1967), often works in their favour with extended families eager to support them in raising children.

Organizational support

With globalization, an influx of multinational companies (MNCs) has heralded new HR practices. Today, many Indian companies and MNCs have programmes to support their female talent, recognizing the importance of gender diversity. In addition to maternity benefits, they are providing flexible working arrangements, sabbatical leaves, and counselling for women. These companies ensure that their high-performing women receive opportunities for career development within the organization.

Infrastructure

There have been dramatic improvements in infrastructure in India, making it more convenient for women to travel safely as jobs demand. Examples include a good network of airlines, star-rated hotels, and facilities in public places.

Legislation and policies

In 2012, the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian Parliament, passed the Companies Bill to improve corporate governance, requiring public companies to have at least one woman director. This has raised the level of urgency in generating a pool of qualified women. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act passed in 2013 has been significant in ensuring that women have safer working conditions.

Women in top management

The narrative of women's presence in management is gradually changing. The *Hindustan Times* (Venkatesh and Himani 2013) draws attention to the fact that there is a growing number of women in the top echelons of corporate India. This trend can be seen clearly in the consumer goods industry. There are examples of women heading companies in the oil and gas industry, and even in the liquor industry. The strongest example of gender diversity in management is in the financial sector (SCB 2010); almost all companies in this sector have a woman on their board and there is an impressive list of women at the helm.

Conclusion

Poised as it is for global competitiveness, India can make a significant impact on the global stage by nurturing its female talent and setting it up for success in leadership. After all, research strongly suggests that women in Asia, and in particular India, have higher aspirations for top roles than their counterparts in the United States (Francesco and Mahtani 2011). The ambitions and achievements of women leaders may well be India's competitive advantage.

Japan

Beginning with the Gender Equality and Employment Act in 1985, Japan's government has enacted various measures to support working women. In 1992, a 1-year maternity leave system was introduced; in 2005, the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children was passed; and 2007 saw the adoption of the Charter for Work-Life Balance. While in the 1980s, government policies concentrated on reducing the burdens of working women's childcare, reforms have affected both women and men since 2000. For example, measures have been passed to change long work hours, a practice that has been typical in Japan.

Women represent more than 42% of the Japanese workforce. Changes in the family system continue to affect women's work. By 2000, households where both husbands and wives work have become typical in Japan. However, situations where both parents work while raising children have resulted in new challenges, including the lack of childcare facilities and the need for work environments for mothers with young children. The percentage of working women drops in the years of childbirth and child-rearing

(Gender Equity Bureau Cabinet Office 2010); many women leave their jobs to raise their children because of the traditional view on the division of labour within the home, wherein men are responsible for supporting the family.

Issues in women leadership

Data indicate that workplace reforms have not resulted in much progress, and women are likely to bear the burden of childcare. The percentage of women in management positions is low and has not reached even 10% nationwide. The government (PMJHC 2014) announced that it would increase the percentage of women in management to 30% by 2020, but the situation is not promising. In companies listed on the stock exchange, only 1.2% of the managers are female. The Abe administration is aggressively pushing measures to promote female participation in managerial positions. This effort is in response to the shrinking size of the workforce resulting from the country's declining birth rate.

Encouraging women leaders in the workforce can be approached from an HRD perspective. The first issue is to help women get started in their careers. Leadership training is especially crucial in this regard. Opportunities to learn about leadership in organizations are offered in their thirties and forties, a time when many women have left their jobs to raise children. An alternative way to offer women these opportunities is needed. It is also necessary to establish male awareness in the workplace regarding the importance of leadership training for women. Supervisors often assume that mothers should not be given opportunities for leadership training because childbearing is demanding. Action is needed to eliminate these assumptions and prejudices in the workplace.

The second issue is to support work-life balance. Efforts are needed to revise the current system of long work hours. Yamaguchi (2014) revealed that an emphasis is often placed on women's ability to work for long hours as a condition for their appointment to a managerial position. The traditional gendered division of labour in the workplace increases obstacles to working women. The belief that men are meant to lead and women offer support is still widespread. These traditional views must be reconsidered.

Third, the diversity policies and the efforts to increase the number of women in management positions must be performed suitable for the conditions of working women. To increase the number of women in executive positions, it is necessary to establish support systems so that women can gain leadership experience while raising children. Many leadership training programmes in companies involve on-the-job training, which assumes long work hours, making it difficult for women to gain access to training opportunities. Greater flexibility in employee training options are needed for women who work while raising children.

Conclusion

Japan has achieved great economic development after World War II, and yet few women are seen in top leadership positions in business, politics, and academy sectors. Efforts for promoting women in the workplace have depended on private enterprises implementing directives from the government. We have now reached a point where companies listen to women's voices and tackle challenges of developing female leaders. Further research is needed on how better to respond to women's needs for leadership development opportunities.

Korea

Bloomberg.com (2014) ran a story on Kwon Seon Joo, the first female bank CEO in South Korea. The article was aptly titled ‘Knife threat failed to halt the first Korean female bank CEO’ and recounted a 1992 story during Kwon’s tenure as a deputy manager who solved a situation involving an angry customer with a knife by calming the man for more than an hour. This story is telling in light of data (Bloomberg.com 2013) by the same magazine showing that South Korea has the widest gender gap in earnings between male and female full-time workers in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. If South Korea’s selection of its first female president of a large bank was seen as a big step forward in achieving equal status between men and women, such data bring us to the sober reality – we have a long way to go.

In this context, I will introduce the findings of a qualitative study conducted by a team of Korean-born female researchers on the topic of women leadership (Cho et al. 2015). The purpose of the study was to explore Korean female leaders’ lived experiences in their work and family balance. This was a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews of 18 women leaders. Our research team consisted of five faculty members from US higher education institutions and one from a large Korean company. Female leaders’ personal stories concerning the balance of family and work life was the focus of the study.

Koreans attribute the wide gender gap in the workforce to the heavy influence of Confucianism in the society. The influence includes acceptance of hierarchy, strong male dominance, collectivism, and a gender-divided family structure (Kim and Rowley 2009). In this sense, a career/job was considered mandatory for men as the provider for the family, while the housekeeping role was commonly assigned to women managing homes and raising children. For career women who have children, childcare is still mainly considered to be the mother’s responsibility. Education is one of the most important social capitals in Korean society. Because of the heavy emphasis on a person’s education, Korean parents’ race to send their children to top colleges starts early. Working mothers’ struggle to balance work and family life is most challenged when faced with difficulties that their school-aged children go through.

Six themes emerged from our interview data: (1) committed to work, (2) balancing family life with work, (3) definition of success, (4) gender identity, (5) being a role model, and (6) needs for support. The research team focused on how the themes are interconnected and should be understood in a nuanced way. In understanding Korean women leaders’ challenges and opportunities, we did not set out to produce one clean solution with an illusion of generalizability. In defining success, for example, our participants’ responses included three concepts of success: (1) the state of equilibrium, (2) process, or (3) outlook on life. The upcoming publication of this study presents the findings in more detail (Cho et al. 2015).

The significance of our research focus was the fact that we had an in-depth look into successful women leaders’ life stories through their own voices. Our team wanted to convey the message that there are diverse ways of addressing common challenges. For instance, a physician was widely considered as successful by her peers. She stated:

I think many people around me see me as a swan. But I’m actually paddling like crazy underneath the water. I keep on paddling until I’m exhausted and collapse but they just see me as a swan.

This quote points to the dichotomy between these successful women leaders’ outward appearance of control and their inward expression of anxiety. It captures the struggles of

managing a double life at home and at work as a leader, an experience shared by other participants. This quote also speaks about being a role model to the next generation of career women. Our participants saw themselves as representatives of women in the workforce and, as a result, seemed to feel a strong sense of responsibility.

The study findings suggest implications for practice and future research. To sustain some sense of balance between work and family life, our participants presented practical implications at individual, organizational, and social levels. For individual strategies, one piece of advice was ‘to prioritize.’ Learning how to assess the importance of tasks and how to assign orders are seen as effective strategies. Also, some suggested ‘redefining’ family life patterns, incorporating personal childcare support that goes beyond the immediate family structure of a two-parent household. Some participants successfully made arrangements with their mothers or mothers-in-law to take care of their children. Other cases involved primary childcare by live-in nannies. In terms of organizational support, the most frequently mentioned suggestion was allowing flexible work hours. On a societal level, childcare for working women should not fall solely under the responsibility of each family, and that is why societal support is urgently needed.

In terms of future research, we identified two issues: (1) further investigation of the contextual factors impacting women’s promotion and needs and (2) the importance of considering cultural differences in understanding women in leadership in different countries. There are definitely some commonalities among the participants of this study as women in leadership positions. There are, however, interesting differences based on context, ranging from family upbringing to a particular company culture: how these factors played in their decision-making process would be of special interest. Equally important are the cultural and social aspects that are unique to South Korea in comparison with those of other Asian countries.

Malaysia

Women in Malaysia have actively contributed to the development of the country since its independence in 1957. In recent decades, the status of women has been uplifted. As the country enjoys economic progress, more qualified women enter the workforce and are promoted to senior positions. Legislation to ensure equal opportunities for women has been passed. In politics, women are playing a more active role, with more than 20 women members of parliament. In addition, women hold important governmental posts, including deputy ministers, diplomats, senior civil servants, elected members of state assemblies, and senators.

According to the Gender Diversity Benchmark for Asia 2011 (CB 2011), the highest percentage of female employees of the total workforce was in Hong Kong and China, with Malaysia trailing fifth out of the six Asian regions surveyed. However, Malaysia performed best (27.6% against the average of 18.3%) in terms of the representation of women in senior positions. Another useful way to assess opportunities for women to advance in their career is to gauge upward mobility in their careers from junior positions to senior appointments. Middle-level female employees had the best chance of advancement to senior posts in Malaysia as compared with other Asian countries surveyed.

Malaysia has successfully moved towards overcoming gender inequality over the period 1980–2010. Women empowerment is greatly enhanced in the political decision-making process. As an increasing number of women begin to be involved in important decision-making, female students are encouraged to pursue higher education. The Malaysian Government outlined specific objectives in the Seventh Malaysia Plan

(1995–2000) to ensure that women could contribute more effectively to the development of the nation (TEPUPMD 1996). These objectives included: (1) promoting greater female participation in the labour market through the provision of more flexible working arrangements and support facilities; (2) providing more educational and training opportunities for women to improve their upward mobility in the labour market; (3) improving the health condition of women; (4) reviewing laws and regulations that inhibited the advancement of women in the economy; (5) strengthening the institutional capacity for the advancement of women; (6) operationalizing the National Policy for Women through the implementation of an action plan; and (7) forging closer linkages at the international level through effective implementation of commitments for the advancement of women.

The higher education sector plays an important role in the advancement of women in Malaysia. To date, there are 22 public universities and more than 100 private universities. Yusof, Alias, and Habil (2011) showed that the level of intake, enrolment, and output of women was higher compared to their male counterparts. Women enrolment at all levels of higher education increased significantly between 1985 and 2008. Malaysian women made up 55.2% of the enrolled population in higher education in 2008. According to the Ministry of Higher Education in 2010, 64.8% of new registration for graduate studies was female students (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2010). In higher education institutions, women are more inclined to enrol in traditional courses such as arts and education, but less in science and technology courses.

Roles of women

As of 2013, the population of Malaysia was 29.9 million, of which 49% were female. Malaysian women have a higher life expectancy of 77.2 years compared to men (72.6 years). Women account for 5.1 million workers (37.6%) (DSM 2012). Women work in diverse fields, facing challenges of organizational life instead of embracing traditional roles of women as housewives. According to the GTIBR (2012), positions held by women in senior management were HR Directors (20%), Chief Financial Officers (10%), and Chief Operating Officers (8%), followed by only 6% of CEOs. Mahpul and Abdullah (2011) argued that the increase in female participation in the workforce was largely due to improved educational opportunities.

Women face formidable challenges in the course of securing achievements in politics and various sectors. According to Ramli and Hassan (1998), there are five obstacles for women to participate in politics: social discrimination against women's roles in the public domain, time constraints due to career and domestic demands, cultural and religious arguments that a woman's place is in the home, structural constraints within each political party that do not allow women to advance beyond a certain level, and a lack of resources in organizational support, personal influence, and finance. Malaysia needs a balanced representation in the public sphere. Having women in the highest level of decision-making means that women issues would be raised, thus ensuring that the needs of the country's female population would be given due consideration.

Women hold public offices and senior administrative posts in government offices. An acknowledgement of women's competencies by the Malaysian Government has led to the appointment of women ministers and top-ranked civil servants. Since the 1980s, successful women from the rural sector have been accorded recognition such as the 'Successful Woman Farmer' and 'Successful Woman Entrepreneur' awards (MWF 2003). Government policies have also facilitated the participation of women in the country's

economy, as reflected in the listing of the Top 10 Most Inspiring Women of Malaysia (TTM 2014).

Success factors of women leaders

One of the key success factors of Malaysian women in leadership is a strong family emphasis on education, which leads to high educational attainment and opportunities to study abroad. The personal characteristics of successful women include curiosity and desire for knowledge, persistence, and hard work. Support from supervisors and mentors has been by far the most important external factor cited. Women's mentors were not necessarily those assigned by the workplace, but individuals the women considered most helpful as role models.

Increasing opportunities to advance women's participation in top management is among future challenges that need to be addressed by the Malaysian Government. The following approaches are recommended by the MWFD (2003):

- Enforce affirmative action to eliminate discriminatory practices in all sectors.
- Increase opportunities for women to access the policy-making process.
- Incorporate gender issues into political agendas to narrow the gap between genders.
- Provide a gender-friendly environment for equal opportunities in public and private sectors.
- Take steps to ensure that the affirmative action agenda are implemented at all levels. The Ministry of Women and Family Development is the apt venue to monitor the implementation of this policy.

Conclusion

Malaysia has seen changes in the sociocultural environment that shape the profile of Malaysian women today. With the country's aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2020, women will be a major group influencing the development of a generation of Malaysians who are entrusted to achieve this task. Measures being initiated by the government to ensure women's participation in education and other key sectors for the country's development will enable them to showcase their capabilities in leadership roles to address the most pressing needs of women in Malaysia.

Sri Lanka

Although Sri Lanka is still considered a male-dominated society, the country has created a favourable environment for empowering women with the appointment of Sirima Bandaranayake as the world's first woman prime minister in 1958. Since then, a few women have begun their political careers. However, women are struggling to reach top leadership positions due to gender biases and unequal treatment for women in the workplace and society in general. Despite unequal treatment for female managers, there is little research on women leaders (Fernando 2012; Gunawardena 2013). The low participation of women in leadership positions has been a trend for many decades. This trend is gradually changing, and female participation in less common vocations and decision-making positions is slightly increasing. In the 2010 Labor Force Survey (DCS 2010), female senior officials and managers make up only 1.1% of the entire population.

Context

Sri Lanka, an island nation with twenty million people, has enjoyed a comparatively high literacy rate (92% and above) since the early 1900s. Slow economic growth and increasing youth poverty and women's unemployment have been the most crucial issues (Jayaweera et al. 2007). Ninety per cent of Sri Lankan women are literate. Women comprise 63% of the workforce and have equal skill sets compared with men. According to the Labor Force Survey (DCS 2010) women account for 20% of all senior managers.

In Sri Lanka, men are perceived as providers of economic means and security for women and children, while women are perceived as nurturers and caregivers (Wijayatilakem 2001). Sri Lankan organizations consider women as less capable and informed than men (Fernando 2012). Women are often stereotyped as less desirable employees and are not allowed to enter important management positions (Cabrera 2007). Gender stereotypes have become major constraints for women to rise to top managerial positions (Powell, Butterfield, and Parent 2002). Leadership has been perceived as a masculine concept (Binns 2010). Fernando (2012) found that women who displayed masculine nature would have better chances to be promoted as managers. In this sense, the basic assumption is that only men have powers to become ideal managers, while women are less capable of becoming managers. Cultural norms and gender biases in Sri Lanka have become hindering factors for women to progress in their careers.

Women's participation

Participation in politics

Sri Lanka had the first woman prime minister (Sirima Bandaranayake) in the world in 1958 as a result of the assassination of her husband and not by choice. Her daughter (Chandrika Bandaranayake) became the first woman president due to her family involvement in politics. Only a few women from regular families can enter politics.

Corporate leadership

In general, women are not able to reach top positions due to male dominance and the lack of reputation as top performers (Hewapathirana 2011). Rohini Nanayakkara became the first female CEO in 2009 in the banking sector. A few studies carried out in various sectors showed that female participation in Sri Lanka is still low and there are many obstacles for women to climb their career ladder. Ratwatte (2008) showed that, out of 198 managers in the top 25 companies, only 10 were women. A survey of women in senior management positions in large companies found that there was only one female CEO in 2009 (Kangaraarachchi 2011). Among the 40 most valuable brands of Sri Lanka, only three had female CEOs. Kangaraarachchi (2011) showed that, in the 50 most valuable companies, 34 companies had no women on their boards.

The legal field

The first female Chief Justice (Dr Shirani Bandaranayake) was appointed in 2012. Though Sri Lanka earned a reputation of having the world's first female prime minister, women leadership in politics has not improved.

Higher education

The number of women in higher education is increasing. Female participation in the technology field is lower than that in the accountancy field. An estimated 60% of all accountancy students are women (Jayaweera et al. 2007). In accounting, 63% of all professionals are women.

Inhibiting factors for women in leadership roles

Many factors continue to inhibit women in top management positions in Sri Lanka.

Social attitudes towards women's roles

Women take care of family, children, and elders. Women lack reputation and social acceptance as leaders, executives, and entrepreneurs. Due to prevailing social and cultural values, many women prefer to resign and focus on the family. The disparity in female representation at executive levels in public and private sectors has been highlighted.

Power and masculinity

Men in top managerial positions prefer to hire men over women for top positions. Women are the majority in low-paid vocations such as government clerks, salespeople, and school teachers. The situation at executive and management levels is not so promising because women represent fewer than 2% in government services and business organizations.

Implications

Due to the above-mentioned obstacles, only a handful of women have reached managerial positions. The majority are either unemployed or employed in the low-paid unskilled workforce. As this underutilization of women's labour and talent is a waste of valuable resources, women's contribution to the economy, business, and society has been comparatively low. There is a need to empower women through training and development to encourage women to become top leaders. There is also a need for change in social attitudes towards women as lesser members. The government needs to create opportunities for women so that they can demonstrate their talents. Actions are essential to reduce gender disparity and unequal treatment. Companies must provide equal opportunities for the best talent to rise to top management and corporate board positions. Otherwise, the massive investment in health and education, which the nation's economy has made for decades, will not generate a return-on-investment. Laws should provide equal opportunities for women in organizations to rise without hindrance.

Taiwan

The transition of women into management positions in Taiwan has been influenced by the gender equality movement and by an overall change in gender ideology in the society. In early years, due to political and social constraints, only a few private female organizations advocated equality issues. As the democratic system changed and grew in the 1990s, street demonstrations and legislative lobbying for gender equality have increased. The power of female organizations has developed and begun to influence trends in legislative

change. In 1997, the Committee of Women's Rights Promotion in Executive Yuan, a governmental platform, was established. The Gender Equality in Employment Law was approved in 2001 to help remove obstacles for women's participation in the workplace (Huang 2011). In 2006, all the committees under the Executive Yuan and the national and state-run enterprises and government entities were required to be made up of at least one-third of each gender.

Such developments have gradually influenced gender ideology in the country and have further encouraged the prevalence of women in management. Gender ideology involves people's concerns about their marital and family roles (Greenstein 1996; Hochschild and Machung 2012) and acts as a lens through which individuals view their social world and make decisions about work and family responsibilities (Davis and Greenstein 2009). Studies showed that the development of the equality movement in the country has moved gender ideology from a traditional to a more egalitarian state. In the early 1990s, Cheng and Liao (1994) found from early studies of female managers that a woman's primary role was still seen in traditional terms, such as within the family. Ten years later, Taiwanese women, particularly younger women, saw their prospects as improving (Chen 2000). Chou, Fosh, and Foster (2005) also found that female managers felt their opportunities for ascending the organizational hierarchy had improved.

Chang, Du, and Liao (2012) compared data from 2002 and 2012 and found that gender ideology in Taiwan has continued to move in a more egalitarian direction. For example, 42% of respondents in 2012 disagreed with the statement, 'a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works,' compared with a rate of 35% who disagreed in 2002. In answering another question, 'all in all, family life suffers when a woman has a full-time job,' 70% of the respondents chose either 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' in 2012 compared with only 60% in 2002. With respect to work division, 49% of the respondents in 2012 disagreed with the statement, 'a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after home and family,' which was an increase of more than 15% from 2002.

Although female employees' average monthly earnings are still lower than those of their male counterparts, by about US \$300, the female labour participation rate has increased 5.4% steadily from 1990 to 2010. While the social climate has changed, the influence of women in top management has also become more obvious in Taiwan. For example, in the technology industry, the smartphone brand HTC was established by a female leader named Wang who started the global company and served as the first female leader on HTC's board. Her achievement was heralded in a *New York Times* profile (Holson 2008).

As a successful female entrepreneur, she encouraged women to pursue the right to speak, gain a good education, and join in the workplace. In addition, she suggested that organizations and the government should provide women with a platform for career development (Wang 2013). Another example is in the financial industry. Taipei 101, formerly known as the Taipei World Financial Center, also has a female president named Sung. Sung has stated that a sense of well-being in the workplace can increase the sense of well-being in the family (Sung 2014). Although the percentage of women at the executive level has grown slowly, business corporations, such as L'Oreal, Yahoo, and Chlittina, have named women as their top managers.

In addition to business, female leaders have gained influence in the public sector that has been dominated by men. According to the Taiwan Directorate-General of Personnel Administration, which is a professional agency for HRM in government, the number of high-level male civil managers was 22-fold higher than the number of females in 1991. In 2010, the gap was decreased by threefold (Huang 2011). Such change has also occurred in the community sector. In 2009, Taiwan suffered a disaster, Typhoon Morakot, and many

aboriginal villages were destroyed. People lost their homes, land, and hopes. They knew neither where to go nor how to continue their lives. Traditionally, elder men with high social status serve as village leaders. Faced with this serious disaster, however, a young woman, Yu,¹ was selected as the village leader in a community for homeland rebuilding. Becoming the first female leader did not make her task any easier. Nobody knew how to handle the consequences of the disaster and doubts arose. She witnessed (personal communication, December 12, 2009):

Some people did not believe that a female can be a leader. Although the road taken was full of difficulties, I thank those who had hurt me. Because of that, I learned tolerance and appreciation.

The young female leader's reflection illustrates a difficult journey that female managers must travel to become top managers. According to Hsung and Chow (2001), work-family conflicts and glass ceiling situations have been concerns for female employees, as they climb up the organizational ladder, and their concerns often restrain their career aspirations. The president of Taipei 101, Sung (2014), for instance, has found that when work-family conflict happens, women tend to choose family over work. To support female leaders, top female managers, including herself, have recently established an association named *Women on Boards*. In addition to assisting female career development, it advocates policies that will enhance the percentage of women on boards because the rate of female top managers in business sectors is much lower than that in the public and non-profit sectors (Mo 2011).

Some scholars have discussed whether Confucian teachings affect women's empowerment in the workplace (Chen 2000). Chou, Fosh, and Foster (2005) found that female participants' opinions varied regarding whether cultural values limit women's opportunities at work. Chang (2009) indicated that people have differing interpretations regarding these traditional teachings. Some scholars have argued that the meaning of Confucius' words should not be isolated from a historical context (Nan 1988). Some also have argued that collectivism, which emphasizes the interdependence of group members in the society, has a greater influence on gender issues. Studies (e.g., Chou, Fosh, and Foster 2005) have reported that putting family interests over individual goals is a reason some women hold back on their career aspirations. These diverse opinions indicate that women's career choices and social behaviours are affected by multiple philosophies and thoughts. Attempting to attribute complex gender phenomena to a single value may be superficial and oversimplified.

In 2010, the United Nations combined four existing women organizations into one, named *UN Women*, along with a higher decision-making authority in order to improve women's issues and promote gender equality. In the same year, the Gender Equality Division in Executive Yuan, was established for women's rights and gender equality in Taiwan. Women in top management continue to be marginalized in many fields that are dominated by men. Their career roads are often paved with challenges and obstacles. However, a number of reports showed that women leaders endeavoured to overcome these difficulties and further helped other women (Chou, Fosh, and Foster 2005; Hu 2013; Ke 2014). What they create are new possibilities and innovative pictures for female roles in this era. Future studies should expand the lens to include female managers in different fields so that their needs could be heard, understood, and met.

Thailand

Thailand is a developing country in Southeast Asia. Gender equality is one of the areas that have received attention in Thailand due to the major change in 2011 as Thailand announced the first female Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Women's managerial behaviours and their opportunities are spotlighted in business and academic sectors. To be able to understand women's managerial and leadership issues in the country, the socio-cultural and traditional backgrounds of Thailand are reviewed.

Religious and cultural values

Thailand has never been colonized but has been influenced by India and China (Ricklef et al. 2010). Thai leadership styles have been affected by these two dominant cultures (Selvarajah and Meyer 2008). In addition, religion is considered an essential pillar of Thai society (Thakur and Walsh 2013). Buddhism is the common religion in the country and has greatly influenced Thai cultures, lifestyles, and traditions. Strong traditional values have led women to pursue less education and careers. Such values are ingrained in the male and female psyche of the society and manifest the gendered division of labour (Thakur and Walsh 2013). In this context, Thai women are viewed as subservient to men and take an unequal role in family responsibilities.

Situations of Thai women

Thailand ranks 61st out of 142 countries on the Global Gender Gap Report (WEF 2014). Although women issues have become part of the government's agenda, some women's groups, such as Muslim women in the south, hill tribeswomen in the north, and female migrant workers are encountering discrimination and sex-trafficking problems in the country.

Gender equality in the workforce

Since the 1970s, Thailand's economy has transformed from a rural agricultural base to an urban industrial base (ADB 1998). This change has created job opportunities for Thai women to become a part of the educated workforce. However, women are still not being treated as equal when compared with men. There is a strong need for social, institutional, and governmental action before change can occur. According to the NSOT (2013), Thai women make up 46% of the entire labour force, yet men make more money unless there is legislation requiring an equal pay on average. Women receive only 60% of the salary paid to men (UNDP 2006).

In politics, women are under-represented. Women make up 51.1% of Thailand's population, but they accounted for only 16% of the House of Representatives in the 2011 general election (PT 2013). Women constituted more than 61% of the public body in 2008, but they accounted for only 24.5% of senior executives, and their representation fell dramatically to around 9% at the highest position (OCSC 2008).

Thai women leaders

While still holding to family values, women leaders have learned to balance traditional values with their careers. There are some good examples of women leaders who have

not been limited by traditional values (TT 2011). Kaisri Neungsigkapan, the CEO of KMPG-Thailand, holds a forum with other female leaders, to share challenges in work and family balance, including: Chananyarak Phetcharat, the managing director of DHL, Sermsook Patmastana, the CEO of Standard Chartered Bank (Thai), and Siriwan Sukanjanasiri, the managing director of TKS Technologies. Parnsiree Amatayakul, the managing director of IBM Thailand, mirrors such efforts to provide a support group leadership role through a coaching/mentoring of other women leaders in her company. Chamaiporn Uerpairojkit, the first Thai president of Henkel (Thailand), brought about her protective role to her company by carefully orchestrating evacuation procedures during the troubled violence that erupted outside her office. Henkel's business portfolio doubled in 5 years under her nurturing leadership.

In the southern regions, The Women for Peace Association (WePeace) have continued the advancement of education for women. The founder and president, Pateemah Poh-itaeda-oh, with a USAID Program's help (USAID 2014, para. 1), believes:

A key part of this journey has been an understanding of the importance of awareness, both of the self and of how to inspire power in yourself. If you are not a problem solver, you will be a part of the problem.

Future women in management

Socio-economic limitations, combined with workplace discrimination, produce fewer opportunities for female workers, and, as a result, fewer Thai women pursue career advancement (UNDP 2006). Thai's perception of gender discrimination is clouded by traditional values. However, women are becoming more educated. The proportion of female managers has been increasing. Although Thailand has begun to recognize women as a target group in the National Economic and Social Development Plan since the Fourth Plan (1977–81), it is apparent that the country has yet to reach the targets (Cheaupalakit 2014). As the government continues to discuss, pass, implement, and enforce laws for gender equality, it must also rally against discrimination and violations to break down barriers for women. Society, as individuals and as a whole, must reflect on traditional values and religious beliefs, through mentoring and education, and foster better role models to generate and redefine the future of women leaders.

Discussion

This article reflects the dialogue that we had in an innovative session on the topic at the 2014 Asia Chapter of the AHRD, where we all shared how each country has traditionally regarded a woman's primary role as that of a mother and a wife in the domestic sphere, as opposed to a man who is seen as a financial provider of the family. In the examination of eight cases, we did find both convergence and divergence across these eight countries that will be discussed in this section. Because of the brevity of the case descriptions, some caution must be exercised in drawing the conclusions that follow.

Convergence

While each context is different, the eight cases illustrated above share common themes, including: (1) traditional values that assign women to domestic responsibilities; (2) the

resulting gender gap and subsequent efforts by women to achieve gender equality in the workplace; and (3) the need to develop and sustain more women leaders.

Traditional gender roles continue to dominate, and this is reflected not just in the workplace, but also in personal and family life. Women are first and foremost seen as nurturers and caretakers of the family. Such deeply engrained traditional values and their resulting stereotypes have discouraged women from taking more active roles in the workforce, much less leadership positions. Even when they are employed outside of the home, they still carry traditional family responsibilities. In Asia, more and more families are finding themselves, for economic survival, to require dual incomes. When this happens, however, women find themselves struggling with issues related to work and family balance.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, these eight countries face gender inequality that creates barriers for women in moving into management roles. Even with government actions to overcome these inequalities, and company policies and practices designed to create equal opportunities, women remain under-represented in senior management positions in all of these countries. All the presenters shared stories about the current state of gender gap in the workplace in their own countries and how they are addressing this problem on individual and societal levels. Clearly, individual challenges and issues differed quite significantly by each country, depending on their historical and social contexts, such as the influence of Confucianism and Buddhism. However, there was unanimous agreement among the presenters about the current state of gender inequality in the workforce and the need to narrow the gap.

Change towards equality in management opportunities is occurring in all of the countries reviewed, though that change appears to be very slow. While women have education that equals (or exceeds) that of men, men continue to be preferred in recruitment and selection for senior management positions. However, over time, women's educational attainment is likely to result in more women gradually moving into management roles. Efforts to overcome gender discrimination through company policies and practices, government legislation, educational efforts, and global influences have still not succeeded in creating gender equality resulting in women having equal opportunities in management. This is consistent with what has been happening globally; women simply have not yet succeeded in having acquiring equality in management opportunities.

Divergence

In some of the countries reported here, women do have opportunities when they move out of the organized business sectors to establish their own companies. Entrepreneurship in some countries seems to be a way to escape from gender discrimination. However, in other countries, based on traditional roles expecting women to emphasize their role in the family, even entrepreneurship opportunities may not be an option for women. In some of the reviewed countries, but not all, religious values and practices play an important role in fostering gender discrimination. In other countries, traditional culture, not associated with religion, is the primary inhibitor of gender equality. Some countries have succeeded in having high-visibility women in leadership roles at the top of companies and government roles. Others have not yet had this experience. In spite of such individual country examples, however, women have not fostered success for other women to follow similar paths, partially because women's leading roles were given by their family backgrounds in some cases and not by their own leadership excellence. However, there are a few good

examples emerging in all countries so that the next generation of women leaders can be modelled after them.

Conclusion

The existing trajectory suggests that women will achieve equal opportunity in management. But, for how long can countries continue to ignore the human capital represented by half of their population? For economic reasons, alone, countries need to recognize the expertise possessed by women and open equal opportunity for their leadership – in business, in government, in non-profit organizations, in education, and in every aspect of life.

Culture has a strong influence on country behaviours, including gender discrimination. All the authors emphasized an urgent need to develop and sustain more women in leadership positions. Specific examples of governmental policies and organizational support have been shared that served as implications for both practice and research for the future. All the authors' emphasis on the importance of cultural contexts in understanding and improving women leadership issues call for an in-depth investigation on the topic.

This article has critical implications for HRD, providing intriguing insights into developing the potential of highly qualified women in organizations set in rapidly developing Asian countries in which traditional cultural expectations and modernized values coexist. Our discussion opens a possibility to see what has not been exposed and identifies lessons learned from an HRD perspective.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Note

1. A pseudonym is used for the sake of anonymity.

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