

Does the Current Position of Women in the Labour Market in Asia Pacific Countries Signal an End to Gender Inequality?

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Abstract

This article aims to prove that gender inequality still exists and is likely to remain in the region of Asia Pacific countries. In the first part, it will consider the data on three perspectives which are participation, wages and occupational composition of employment for women in order to understand the current situation of women employment. In the second part, it will focus on China and Japan to analyze which blocks women in management. In the third part, it will outline a couple of barriers to gender equality in the Asia Pacific. Finally, it will provide ideas which may reduce the gender discrimination in Asia Pacific area and conclude that gender inequality in the Asia Pacific region is still ongoing.

Keywords: Gender inequality, Women, Labour market, Asia Pacific countries

1. Introduction

Asia has undergone economic developments in the past two decades. The rapid growth of economies may have had some impacts on women's promotion to management and their progress in this role. Women's participations in the labour force and employment have risen in most developed countries, also in the Asian countries. Does it mean that women's lives have been improved or women's status has risen? Is that true that gender inequalities will disappear in the future?

During the last decade, many theories of gender inequalities have developed. Some orthodox theories imply that gender inequalities will be short-term. Such as the Statistical Discrimination theory (Phelps, 1972), which did not give any hope for improvement, indicating that the situation could not be changed until women's length of service reached the level of men. But they have shortcomings. For example, most of them fail to explain why discrimination may occur. However, there are other theories such as institutional and feminist theories suggesting that cultural and institutional factors would result in gender inequalities in the long-run. The Marxist-Feminist approach contributed significantly to understanding the structural cause for discrimination, unfair treatment. Nevertheless, neither 'patriarchy' nor 'capitalism' can be easily taken away. (Yuasa, 2005, p195) Those theories such as Feminist models and organizational theory stress the importance of institutions and the sexual division of labour in shaping women's consciousness which are a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon. (Forde, 2007)

2. Trend of Women and Employment in the Asia Pacific Region

The current situation of women employment can be seen in terms of participation, pay levels and occupational segregation. The relative data can be found in Global Employment Trends for Women (ILO 2004, in Ford 2007).

Firstly, female participation in labour market has increased in recent years across the world, including Asia. According to the statistic figure of ILO (2004), little or no change in female participate rate happened in East Asia, and female participate rate in South-East Asia and South Asia increased. The growing proportion of women in the labour force result to the decrease of participate rate of man. But the gap between the sexes in terms of labour force participation still exists.

Secondly, female and male wage ratios for the Asian countries studied in the paper of Labour Statistics (Forde, 2007) indicate the gender wage gap. There is no close relationship between economic development and female relative earnings. Women in Japan and Korea seem to earn the last relative to their male counterparts, whereas women in China seem to have the highest relative earnings. Women in South-Korea and Japan earned about 54 and 50 percent of the respective male rate of pay in 1990. Moreover, women not only earn less than men, they also tend to own fewer assets.

Thirdly, women in Asia are mainly distributed in clerical and service occupations and relatively highly concentrate in professional occupations such teaching and nursing. But there are very few proportions in managerial occupations. Recently, proportion of women in professional and managerial positions has risen. In the collection of Benson and

Yukongdi (2005, p267), compared to China and Japan, proportion of female managers is relatively high in Hong Kong and Singapore which is in excess of 25 per cent. There is some evidence that the representation of women in management positions is improving along with the increasing female labour force participation, improved education levels and the changing industrial structure.

The results above show that there is a growing but slow acceptance of women in the labour force, and increasingly in management in Asian business. However, any progress made over the past two decades should not be overstated. (Benson and Yukongdi 2005a) In other words, men still dominated access to and progress in, paid employment. Lucie Cheng and Ping-Chun Hsiung (1992) point out, compared with men, women have not benefited equally. They are still underrepresented in the upper grade of occupations, and their average wage continues to be a fraction of their male counterparts. More education for women may not mean more gender equality. On the contrary, it may simply reflect and intensification of women's exploitation resulting from the addition of non-domestic employment with inferior reward to the burden of domestic work. In short, the current position of women in the labour market in Asia Pacific countries does not indicate a victory in gender equality.

3. Review of literature—Women's Managerial Careers in China and Japan

This section focus on analyzing why women in China and Japan are still treated unequally in management by reviewing literature of Cooke (2003) and Yuasa (2005), aiming to lay a premise to the next section.

According to Yuasa (2005), the development that Japanese female employment increased considerably over the post-war period does not greatly improve the gender equality in Japanese workplaces. Women managers are seldom seen in Japan. Even though the gap has slightly narrowed, for example, number of paid female members of the labour force has risen and the ratio of female workers to total number of employees has grown, it is still one of the worst among industrial countries. Yuasa states a couple of critical factors which prevent women worker from becoming managers, including the internal labour market and the rules of promotion, the average short length of service among female workers, the heavy burden of housework for them and task allocations and male dominant cultures in the work organizations. He concludes that all those practices continue to exist in Japanese society and possibly continue to be sources of gender discrimination in workplaces.

Compared with Japan, China has made an achievement in promoting equal opportunities and protecting women's right and interests in their working, family and social life. Nowadays, China has a far higher women's employment rate than the world average. However, little provision exists which tends to ensure and improve the quality of women's employment prospects. Cooke (2003) summarizes four general reasons which can explain the lack of women at the top management level in China. These are: burden of family responsibility, lower educational level, lack of social expectation and tolerance of women's career progression, and the lack of motivation of women. Additionally, there are other two factors at a deeper level which have been little explored maybe sensitive issues which have been avoided very much in public debate. These are: the impact of employment legislation on women's career advancement and mentoring system between men and women. At last, Cooke concludes that it will be very difficult to achieve real gender equality in China.

4. Barriers to Gender Equality in the Asia Pacific Region

From examples of China and Japan, even though there have been many changes and improvement of women's career opportunities occurring over the past two decades, women in those countries can still find numerous barriers to their advancement, both from inside the company and also from family and the society. Here the theoretical perspective of 'gender-organization-system' (Benson and Yukongdi, 2005b; Fagenson, 1993; Omar and Davidson, 2001) will be adopted to analyze which a couple of barriers make gender inequality remain in the future. The analytical framework will be structured by three aspects which interact with each other: gender roles of women, situation and organizational practices, and the social-institutional system.

4.1 Gender roles of women

Women undertake dual roles which are both major domestic responsibilities and their working roles. Cooke (2003) explains that the burden of family responsibility of Chinese women consumes much of their energy and makes them less competitive in their career. Hsung and Chow (2001) find that female employees were concerned that their work conflict would increase if they climbed the organizational ladder. Consequently, some female employees decreased their career aspirations. In Taiwan, female managers experience the dilemma between career commitment and family duties. Several female managers in Taiwan do not prioritize their work above their family role and find combining these dual roles difficult. (Chou, Fosh & Foster). In South Korea, women have limited choices: leaving after childbirth, taking on temporary or part-time jobs, or giving up on marriage or childbirth. (Kang and Rowley, 2005)

4.2 Situation and organizational practices

As Benson and Yukongdi (2005a) point out, women had less developed levels of human capital. Education levels and length of tenure were generally lower for women and this meant they were less likely to have the required managerial skills or experience to compete equally for managerial positions. Education has been denied to many women because families and society place more emphasis on women's role as mother and homemaker. Even though women have similar levels of education to their male counterparts, childbirth and family responsibilities make it impossible that women can gain relevant and equivalent work experience. Besides, women have gained considerable equality in access to education in more developed economies such as Japan and South Korea. But education remains segmented by course. (Kang and Rowley, 2005) For example, considerably more men choose the natural sciences, while women are more likely choose the humanities and arts. This creates a significant barrier in these countries where management positions are primarily accessed through technical skills and training. Even women who have the requisite educational skills will not be able to develop this human capital as women's traditional role as wives, mothers and careers means that their working lives will face collapse. Definitely, as Kang and Rowley (2005) claims, access to education and experience is not gender neutral or a decision made by women alone.

There are a number of barriers were found to relate to the social mores and customs that have developed within the organization. In Japan, as pointed out by Yuasa, the reliance on the internal labour market made the work segmented and women were relegated to lower level jobs. Yukongdi (2005) also find some organizational practices discriminated against women in Thailand. Employers preferred to hire single women, and reserved specific jobs with higher pay for men whom they claimed were more mobile and physically suited for the job. Moreover, women were the first to be laid off during hard times as employers contended that men were the breadwinners. Moreover, the perception of women managers by male colleagues and subordinates is homemakers and mothers role, they do not accept them as supervisor. (Kang and Rowley 2005) As a result of these organizational practices, women were disadvantaged and had fewer opportunities to advance into managerial positions.

Even women have been successful in gaining management positions, there still exist a number of organizational barriers which influent their daily working lives. First, organizations provide little in the way of childcare or family friendly policies that would sort out the dilemmas between women's domestic and work responsibilities. Second, women managers often felt separated in the organization with little support or networks. Third, many women are denied promotion within management ranks because of their male superiors perceptions that men are more capable. Fourth, women often experienced unequal treatment such as being given less challenging work or mainstream jobs. (Benson and Yukongdi 2005a)

4.3 Culture and societal norms

In most Asian societies (China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), women occupy a traditional role which includes family responsibilities, passive behaviour and providing support to husbands, brothers or fathers. This is based on Confucianism which is deep-rooted in society culture during thousands of years. For example, traditional ideas in China emphasize that women should not be above men or a wife should not be more advanced than a husband in her career. (Cooke 2003) Such social-psychological problem of culture attitude is also faced by women in Singapore. The study of Lee (2005) showed that sex stereotypes are still prevalent in Society. There are similar perceptions in India that traditional status, gender stereotyping and role expectations result very clear male perceptions and differential treatment for women. (Budhwar, Saini and Bhatnagar 2005)

All these findings may be reasons which inhibit women in their career progression. However, there are other factors which have been little explored as reasons to explain the gender inequality in employment careers. In particular, gender-biased employment legislation may be a strong reason why women have difficulty in moving upward. The impact of employment legislation on women's career advancement has been limited in Asian countries.

Cooke (2003) states three reasons to prove it. One is the legal and constitutional recognition of gender equality was not obeyed by public in practice, especially in terms of career opportunities. The second reason is employment legislation itself has a strong element of gender bias in certain aspects, particularly its promotion selection and retirement policies close off women's access to the top management ladder. For example, any potential candidates above the age of 35 cannot get managerial training. The third reason is a retirement policy required female worker in general retired five years earlier than their male colleagues in the same occupations.

As Yuasa (2005) points out, legislation cannot provide a quick remedy. At the same time, Japan lack of any penalties for breaches of the legislation. The enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunities Law in 1986 led employers to develop a 'double-track' personnel management system where women were given a choice between a 'career track' which will provide the chances of promotion and company transfers, and a 'non-career track' which has limited chances for advancement but no requirement to move. In 2002, less than 4 percent of employees in the

‘career track’ in any industry were women. (Benson and Yukongdi 2005a)

5. Conclusion

This article initially explores the current position of Asian women from participation, wages and occupational composition, and then considers that rapid economic changes, to some degree, increase women’s participation in labour force and managerial occupation. To answer the original question whether a greater acceptance of Asian women in management signal an end to gender inequality in the Asia Pacific countries, this essay states a range of barriers of women’s career and finds that organizational and social cultures, family structures and organizational processes all contribute to shaping of women’s career patterns. The barriers that stand in the way of women’s development arise in four aspects: gender roles of women, situation and organizational practices, the social-institutional system and gender- bias employment legislation.

A major barrier facing women in the workplace is societal norms and cultural which include sex-role stereotyping, male-female interaction patterns and societal norms. A second barrier is organizational practices which have contributed to gender discrimination. A third of barrier is that women themselves. Women undertake both domestic responsibilities and organizational roles. This results women downshifting their career ambitions. (Chou, Fosh and Foster 2005) Moreover, Cooke (2003) uses ‘women’s fault’ to explain that women have limited success in their careers. For example, they are narrow-mindedness, low self-esteem and lack leadership charisma, confidence and motivation in self- improvement.

In terms of employment legislation, even though it has some current weaknesses, it can make a contribution of women’s position improvement in the future. Legislative changes may lead to an improved situation of women. Legislation can establish a community standard and serves to illustrate what is acceptable behaviour. Moreover, a number of opportunities may serve to improve the future employment and managerial prospects for Asian women such as increasing education levels of women changing approaches to HRM practice and growing awareness of the inefficiencies and sub-optimal levels of organizational performance produced by gender discrimination. As Yukongdi (2005) points out, the increase number of women undertaking tertiary-level courses parallels the increased number of women occupying managerial positions in Thailand. Cooke (2005) suggests introducing modern HRM practices as providing opportunities for women managers. (Benson and Yukongdi 2005a)

However, the deeply rooted feudal culture of men’s superiority to women is very difficult to be eliminated. In addition, there is no strong political that can enforce the constitutional and legal rights of women; there is no independent legal procedure that women can challenge the employment policies of managements. It will be difficult to achieve the real gender equality and gender discrimination is likely to remain overtime.

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