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# 1 Introduction: theorising and managing gender diversity in the Asian context

*Mustafa F. Özbilgin and Jawad Syed*

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This new century of ours must, for once and for all, be a century that values the girl child, that respects the woman, and protects its daughters, mothers and sisters in peace and in war, that honours and dignifies its women with economic freedom and allows us to be judged by our individual achievements.

Benazir Bhutto (1953–2007)<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary Asia is a context where one finds brevity of research and publications on management of gender diversity (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Although there are a relatively large number of studies on gender equality in various countries in Asia, most of the studies have been conducted in the realm of social policy or from a religio-political paradigm (for example, Caplan, 1985; Kandiyoti, 1991; Ali, 2000; Louie, 2002; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Syed et al., 2009), rather than in the contemporary management and organisation paradigms. The current volume seeks to fill this gap by bringing together studies which specifically focus on the contemporary Asian context of diversity and equality at work. Chapters in the volume achieve this by building on what we already know about gender equality and adding other forms and strands of equality and diversity in the Asian context.

Asia is rich in history and traditions of gender equality. Despite an increasing attention to Asia in English language sources, studies of diversity and equality in this geography have traditionally focused on gender issues in the Middle East and the Arab world (for example, Mernissi, 1987; Afkhami, 1995; Özbilgin, 2000; Moghadam, 2003; Syed, 2008), and also to some extent on gender issues in India and China (for example, Caplan, 1985; Agarwal, 1992; Gustafsson and Li, 2000; Louie, 2002), leaving large segments of Asia underexplored. This volume is a departure from the tradition of scholarship which considers diversity and equality issues in a limited segment of Asia. In this sense, this volume also informs us of the heterogeneity of norms, beliefs and cultures of gender equality in the region.

Nishii and Özbilgin (2007) note that the field of global diversity management, with its unique set of tensions involving transfer versus emergence, centralisation versus decentralisation, and globalisation versus

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localisation of its prescriptions, offers a new challenge to research and practice of diversity management. The challenge is rather profound as well as important in the context of gender diversity management. For example, the 2008 Gender Gap Report provides some evidence on the link between the gender gap and the economic performance of countries. The report shows a strong correlation between competitiveness and the gender gap scores. While this does not imply causality, the possible theoretical underpinning of this link is evident. Countries that do not fully capitalise effectively on one-half of their human resources (that is, women) run the risk of undermining their competitive potential. There is thus an economic incentive behind effective management of gender diversity, in addition to promoting equality as a basic human right (WEF, 2008).

Studies of diversity in single strands are reductionist in nature as they often silence the suffering of individuals who suffer from multiple forms of disadvantage. For example, studies which focus simply on gender are criticised for ignoring the different agendas and demands of women and men across different backgrounds of culture, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation, among other salient diversity strands. In our age of increased individualisation where organisational attention has shifted to unique expectations of individual workers, as opposed to demands of collective groups of workers, there is demand for developing theorisation that can account for the implications of intersectionality of gender, ethnicity, disability and other salient categories on chances and choices of individuals at work. At least some chapters in this volume shed some light on intersectionality of strands of difference and diversity as these relate to individual experience and organisational perspectives in the Asian context.

In 13 chapters (plus the introduction), this volume offers an understanding of gender diversity and equality in Asia. The chapters demonstrate high levels of gender dissimilarity in the form of continued underrepresentation of women in positions of power and authority in the region. However, at the same time, they present some counterintuitive arguments regarding gender similarity, illustrating how the individual aspirations of both women and men in the region are remarkably similar and that what differentiates their experience are the assumptions which underpin the organisation of work and life. The unique nature of the Asian institutional structures, approaches and processes are examined in order to account for variations in representation and inclusion at work for women and men.

Al-Dajani (Chapter 2) examines diversity and inequality among women in employment in the Arab Middle East region and offers a new research agenda. Her chapter presents a research agenda addressing Arab women's economic participation in the Arab Middle East. This will further our understanding about the persistent low level of women's economic

participation and contribute to developing advanced regional policies. Within the diversity and inequality framework, Arab women's economic participation in the public, private, non-profit and informal home-based sectors is discussed. The importance of researching the emerging gender segregated marketplace and regional intra-migration as they contribute to changing the social and economic landscape of the region is also highlighted. Finally, the chapter recommends a qualitative feminist research approach to investigate Arab women's economic participation.

Ali (Chapter 3) offers a comparison of key features of equal employment opportunity (EEO) for women in three neighbouring countries in South Asia, namely Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Based in the literature, the chapter compares macroeconomic data on female employment, legal and institutional structures, and organisational policies and practices of EEO in the three countries. The study identifies a common trajectory of female disadvantage in employment and economic participation in the South Asian region. However, despite similar legislative frameworks and organisational practices of EEO in the three countries, women in Pakistan appear to be relatively more disadvantaged in terms of income parity and participation in the formal sector. The study suggests that the joint effect of patriarchal cultural traditions, narrow interpretation of religion and inadequate implementation of EEO laws may be constraining female employment in Pakistan.

Aminudin (Chapter 4) examines gender attitudes towards an employee involvement (EI) scheme in Malaysia. EI has been the focus of considerable research on the management of people in organisations, particularly on whether EI results in improved employee attitudes and behaviours, and, in turn, company performance. Although EI trends have continued to interest academics and practitioners and are well documented, the literature is relatively silent on studying EI schemes in relation to gender. This chapter intends to reconcile this gap by examining differences between the attitudes of men and women towards EI programmes. A second feature of this research is its focus on a non-Western context. Quality circles and employee share ownership schemes were the focus of this study of EI. The general aim was to understand the relationship between EI and employees' organisational commitment and the effects of gender and degree of participation within the Malaysian context. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used in a mixed methods study. The research found that there were no significant differences in the attitudes of men and women toward EI schemes; nor were there any gender differences in wider work-related attitudes including organisational commitment, job satisfaction and attitudes towards management.

Andaleeb (Chapter 5) explores participation in the workplace in

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Bangladesh with reference to gender integration issues for organisational leaders. With women entering the workforce in Bangladesh in greater numbers because of economic and other pressures, many questions have begun to arise: how do they see themselves in the organisational setting? How do they perceive their role in the organisation and the organisational climate? How well have they integrated? Can they communicate openly? Do they feel discriminated against? Do their opinions matter? Little research has been conducted to answer these questions that need to be understood to enable women to be more effective in their organisational contexts. Based on an exploratory survey of 90 government and private sector employees in Dhaka, this chapter aims to determine the correlates of participation and whether and to what extent men and women, working together in the modern organisation, perceive their participation differently. The patterns of correlations and differences provide useful insights for decision makers.

Burke, Koyuncu and Fiksenbaum (Chapter 6) illustrate gender differences in work experiences, satisfactions and well-being in the Turkish context. Their chapter investigates gender differences among managers and professionals working in the manufacturing sector in Turkey. It replicates and extends previous work by employing a different sample working in a large developing secular Muslim majority country. Data were collected from 877 respondents using anonymously completed questionnaires. Measures included personal demographic and work situation characteristics, stable individual difference personality factors, job behaviours, work outcome, indicators of quality of life (for example, work–family conflict, life satisfaction) and psychological well-being. There were considerable differences in personal demographic and work situation characteristics, consistent with previous findings. Women were younger, less likely to be married or to have children, to have tenure at work, and they mostly worked at lower levels in the organisation and earned less than their male counterparts. Males and females were generally similar on stable individual difference personality factors, job behaviours, work outcomes, quality of life and psychological health. The few differences that were observed were likely the result of females being at lower organisational levels. Thus despite considerable demographic and work situation differences, female and male manufacturing managers in Turkey reported similar job behaviours, satisfactions and psychological well-being. The authors note, however, that one should not be lulled by these findings. Organisations still need to proactively support the career aspirations of their talented managerial and professional women. Suggestions for individuals, families, firms and the state are offered.

Courmadias, Fujimoto and Härtel (Chapter 7) examine Japanese equal

employment opportunity law (EEOL) and its implications for diversity management. Diversity management in Japan is struggling at the political and organisational level. EEOL aims to promote equal opportunity and treatment between men and women in employment. After 23 years, despite revisions in 1997 and 2006, the EEOL has proven ineffective in achieving this goal. One of the main reasons for this is the soft law approach adopted in the drafting, amending and implementing of the EEOL. The authors consider the impact of the EEOL on women in the workplace and argue that a soft law approach is ineffective in removing gender inequality. The chapter concludes with a call for top management's voluntary initiated diversity management alongside broader EEOL prohibitions and penalties for gender inequity.

Jamali and Abdallah (Chapter 8) analyse how diversity management has been interpreted and enacted in the context of some Lebanese organisations, and whether diversity management rhetoric has translated into improved realities, opportunities and experiences for Lebanese working women and managers. Through a systematic review of secondary evidence, their chapter highlights the challenges facing gender diversity management in a patriarchal society where the caregiver role continues to be predominant and in the context of less than supportive legal and social conditions. The evidence gathered capitalises mainly on the views of the women managers themselves, supplemented by views of HR managers/top managers regarding diversity management practices in their respective organisations. In essence, the chapter highlights the clear prevalence of gender-neutral policies as a solution to gender issues in the Lebanese context and suggests that diversity management alone is unlikely to deliver fairness and inclusion at work in the context of patriarchal cultures. In such environments, the success of diversity management is also contingent on gentle coercive pressure and persuasion from NGOs, governments and professional organisations to ensure equity and advancement for a growing female workforce.

Metcalf (Chapter 9) examines human resource development and empowerment of women in the Middle East, in particular the Muslim women in the region. The chapter draws together a wide range of studies on women's empowerment and policies and interventions which seek to promote human development in the region. The chapter connects political economy with socio-religious contextual assessment and offers a comprehensive understanding of the past, present and future of gender and development in the Middle East. The chapter also offers multifaceted strategies for change at organisational and national levels.

Nolan (Chapter 10) provides a historical overview of 'gender equality' policies of the Chinese Communist Party and investigates some

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contradictory outcomes of these policies in terms of women's role in Chinese society. The chapter offers an assessment of political economy with particular reference to women with different backgrounds. Nolan also reviews the successes and failures of equal opportunity legislation in China and problematises discrimination at work. Finally, the chapter examines female entrepreneurship in China. It concludes with comparative insights to situate China in an international context of gender equality at work.

Rowley, Yukongdi and Wei (Chapter 11) explore managing diversity from the perspective of women and management. The chapter offers the gender–organisation–system approach, which the authors use to analyse gender inequality in management positions in organisations, and provides a comparative perspective on the nexus of employment and education. The authors discuss barriers to career advancement, complexities of balancing work and life in Asia. The chapter offers an overview of nine Asian economies, offering a review of changes and challenges in the region.

Syed (Chapter 12) offers an international perspective on gender empowerment and gender diversity in Muslim majority countries. First, he discusses various Islamic discourses on gender diversity and how they may affect women's empowerment and their participation in the formal economic sector. The chapter then offers an empirical analysis of the state of gender empowerment and female economic activity in Muslim majority countries to highlight the impact of various discourses on gender diversity. The chapter highlights some major differences between Arab and non-Arab Muslim countries in terms of gender ideology and the corresponding implications for gender empowerment and diversity management. It also identifies some conceptual problems in the current construction of the UN Gender Empowerment Measure, including its emphasis on similarity not diversity of women and men.

Vo and Strachan (Chapter 13) focus on women's employment, in particular in white-collar and professional employment, in Vietnam. They explicate labour market issues in the context of economic reform and women's employment. The chapter also elaborates on organisational-level concerns and reports on findings of a project on gender equity in the steel industry in Vietnam.

Zheng (Chapter 14) focuses on a different aspect of gender and diversity management in China. In her chapter, she explores the issue of diversity in the sex industry in China and situates the functioning of the industry in the context of the political economy. The chapter explains that, in China, the ways in which prostitution is intertwined with state power, rural–urban migration, and the entertainment industry is unique and is a fruitful source for comparative research.

Overall, we hope that this volume will prove a valuable addition to

resources on gender diversity management in Asia and also internationally, equally accessible and useful to research scholars and students as well as managers and policy makers interested in non-orthodox discourses and practices of diversity and equal opportunity. Last but not least we would like to offer our thanks to all contributors for their wonderful and exciting contributions to this volume. We are in particular thankful to Charmine Härtel and Edwina Pio for their help in reviewing some chapters of the current volume. We are also thankful to Ben Booth, Suzanne Giles and Jenny Wilcox of Edward Elgar for closely working with us in designing and completing this book project.

### Note

1. Benazir Bhutto, Speech on women's emancipation, Women in Business International Forum, Damascus, Syria, 20 May 2005.

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