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IMPACT OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON THE FEMALE LEADERS IN OMAN: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Multiple studies indicate that national culture has a profound impact on female leadership. However, there is no evidence of such study in Oman. This research attempts to fill the gap and evaluate the Omani cultural implications on female leadership. The analysis of qualitative data, gathered from 35 female leaders working in Omani organizations, confirm the theoretical base that national culture of Oman does impact the female leaders and their development. But, with the changing times and subsequent initiatives taken by the sultanate, backed by sound awareness of the power of women leaders, the negative cultural norms are showing a down trend. It is concluded that the female leaders in Oman are exploring their potential and are taking up the challenges thus redefining the culture.

KEYWORDS: Women, National Culture, Female Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Women are more recognized as a mother, wife and daughter than being a Leader. Things have changed over the last few years and women have proved that they are more than what have been perceived of them. However, as stated by Mary Kay Ash (2012), there are many “Clouds” affecting the “Silver Lining” of women being successful to reach beyond the stars. Such barriers includes standardized concept of societal sex-role, attitudes toward women in leadership position and their competences, the general acceptance of male managerial model and other psychological factors as low self-esteem, fear of failure and role conflicts (Virginia E. O’Leary, 1978). The first three barriers are cultural factors and play a major role in an individual’s development. A society’s culture is like a candle mold and people in that society are like wax; it shapes an individual’s perception, attitude, believes and behaviors. Therefore it has a major influence on how females lead and their attitude towards leadership (Nagan Thi Thuy Le, 2011), impacting on the efficiency and the development of female leadership.

“Faith” determines the culture of Oman as a nation like the rest of the countries in the Middle East, but yet there are number of different cultures within the nation which makes Oman’s culture different from other Arab Countries. Oman has changed dramatically over the period of time, but yet it holds on to its traditional values, beliefs throughout the transformation (Richard K. Common, 2011). Oman’s 2040 vision has lead to significant and remarkable transformation creating opportunities for career growth where as there is only 16.43% of female involvement in the labour market (NationMaster.com, 2012). Half of the population of Oman consists of female, but only 1% of that population holds leadership positions (Amideast, 2012). Therefore it is necessary to understand what causes less involvement of Omani Females in the labour market, considering that their competencies are equal to man, so what stops them form stepping in? What stops the organization from taking them in?. This research aims to bridge this gap and attempts to study the cultural

implications (if any) on the effectiveness of female leaders in Oman. Further, it attempts to find out the willingness of organization to have female leaders and the attitude of male subordinates toward their female leaders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

National Culture

National culture is "The collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from another" (Geert & Gert Jan Hofstede, 2012). Leung (2005) determined national culture as values, beliefs, norms and behavioral patterns of group of people. These values and beliefs determine the thought processing, behavioral patterns, method of problem solving and tactics of decision making (Hall, 1976 cited in Ali, M. and Brooks, L., 2008). National Culture consists both implicit and explicit elements, therefore it is complex and difficult to have one solid definition and these elements are explained through terms such as behaviors, norms, values, beliefs, artifacts, practices and basic assumptions (Groeschl & Doherty, 2000 cited in Ali, M. and Brooks, L., 2008).

Arab National Culture

Based on the research done on the Arab countries (Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya and Saudi Arabia) Hofstede (2012) came up with the following evaluation about the Arab countries national culture

- **Power Distance:** Arab countries accepts power distribution. Hierarchy in organisations reflects inequalities, centralizations is most preferred, subordinates are not proactive and wanted to be dictated and the desired boss is a benevolent autocrat
- **Individualism:** People have a close long-term commitment towards relationships, where members look-out for and protect each other. Loyalty being the strongest element in a collectivist culture it sidelines other societal rules and regulations. Employer employee relationships are more like family relationships. Employee's opinions are considered in hiring and/or promoting a member in the respective teams/groups
- **Masculinity/Femininity:** The Arab culture is dominated by masculinity. People are more work oriented, a decisive and assertive manager is more desired, equity, competition and performance is more prioritized and conflicts are resolved aggressively
- **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Arab culture highly prefers to avoid uncertainty. It indicates that rigid codes of belief and behaviors are maintained and any belief and/or behaviors out of the common codes are not tolerated thus limiting the acceptance of innovation. Cultures avoiding uncertainty accepts rules, people are more often seen to be busy and hard working, accuracy and punctuality are the norms and feeling if being secure is the factor which drives motivation

Female Leaders

It is proven that the behaviors, thoughts, actions and reactions of male and female differ. It does not mean that one sex is better or weaker than the other; it simply means that they are different (Allan Pease & Barbara Pease, 2001). This difference does impact the leadership style adopted by the female leaders. Many scholars have proven that the 21st century organizations require a leadership style which is non coercive, building healthy relationships and encouraging teamwork, which is inherent in female leaders (Colwill & Townsend, 1999 cited in J. S. Pounder, 2002). The society/culture has shaped the psychology of females which gives them the quality of being a transformational leader,

meaning female leaders are more relationship oriented than task oriented (Grant, 1988; Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Park, 1996 cited in J. S. Pounder, 2002). Female leaders' leadership tactics are more based on developing healthy relationships, encouraging through positive feedback and supporting empowerment, which is different from the traditional leadership style adopted by male leaders, such as controlling, aggressive and more of task oriented (Helgesin, 1990 cited in J. S. Pounder, 2002). Studies by J. S. Pounder (2002) indicate that female leaders have vital characteristics of an effective leader. Fierman (1990) stressed the betterment of female leaders by stating that the ability of female in developing "esprit de corps" is crucial to the organisation which progresses through team based achievement.

National Culture and Female Leadership

Participation of females in the workforce has been increased and is continuing to do so. However the overall leadership positions held by women all over the world is less compared to men. One of the main reasons for this gap is the national cultural barrier. Barsh and Yee (2012) identified four culture related obstacles for the career advancement of women;

"**Structural Obstacles":** Even though management of the companies announce against gender inequality and favoring females on top, there is only little effort done and they are not committed accomplish what they promise. It is observed that females find it difficult to get closer to executives and get sponsor relationship (Barsh & Yee, 2012). One reason for females not being able to get sponsor relationship is that there are few female mentors' available and cross-gender mentorship might demand the females to develop a close relationship which the society may perceive it as a romantic relationship (Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011). This prevents most females to develop good relationship with their executives.

"Lifestyle Choices": Men are primary breadwinners, but not primary caregivers, but females are primary caregivers and therefore their family responsibilities are more than the men. This forces females to slow their career growth, shift roles to reduce the time consumption in the office responsibility and avoid traveling (Barsh & Yee, 2012), which allows them to have more time for the family. They choose to work in the subordinate level as they do not have enough energy to carry out the demanding duties in the organization since their energy has been spent more on the tough jobs at home (Anker, 1997 cited in Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011). This forces the management to choose a male over a female as higher positions demands more time and females are not able to work late, come early or choose work responsibilities over family needs.

"Institutional Mind-Sets": Organizations are used to see a masculine character occupying the top positions and it is difficult to accept a feminine character instead, therefore they demand the females to act and behave like males. This becomes a major obstacle for famles who willing to juggle work and family at the same time (Barsh & Yee, 2012).

"Individual Mind-Sets": females tend not to accelerate their career growth and they prefer to move to a support roles than a top positions (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan (2011) study emphasized that females' desire for career growth is lower than the males. They tend to go in the directions where the society's expectation of a female leads to, focusing on occupation which fits into society's perception of female roles. Society plays a major impact on the females themselves, they limit their growth and feel content within box they live in.

Gender Stereotypes Impacting Female Career Development

Gender stereotype is beliefs of what males and females are suppose to be; how they should act, behave, react, etc. It defines what sort of activities belongs to females and males; it underlines what is masculinity and femininity (Newsweek, 2000). Gender stereotype are evident in all the societies, some are positive and some a negative towards females' career development. The research done by Ngan Thi Thuy Le (2011) about cultural impact on Female's leadership in higher education in Vietnam stresses that in Vietnam age is the important factor when defining leadership and she further stressed that the female's self-confidence and career ambitions are lower due to gender roles, social-cultural norms and stereotypical practices which also impacts the recruitment process. No matter how qualified or right they are their efforts are not appreciated and such gender stereotype not only impacts the level confidence and self-actualization but also the performance evaluation which leads promotion of females (Eagly & Carau, 2001 cited in Preko, 2012).

Organizational Perception of Female Leaders

Females are high in entry level but never go beyond middle level management or leave the organisation before they could reach the top (Barsh & Yee, 2012). Ngan Thi Thuy Le (2011) research showed that the national and organizational culture impacted the leadership participation of females and their practices leading to fewer females in managerial positions.

Number of research outcomes has stressed that in general there are negative perceptions about females being in leadership positions which accounts to the lack of females in managerial positions (Deal and Stevenson, 1998 et al. cited in J. S. Pounder, 2002). It is probably because the society has used to see a male dominated business world and it is difficult to accept the changes. Therefore the organizations fill the managerial positions with people who fit the existing norms (Wesson, 1998 cited in R. Growe & P. Montgomery, 2000). Their acceptance of men holding managerial is due to the negative perception towards female leaders.

Graves and Powell (1995) study supported this fact by proving that recruiters favored male applicants more than female applicants while there was no significant difference between both applicants (Patil, 2008). Likewise, Author (2006) asserts that male superiors favor male subordinates than female subordinates in terms of promotions, trainings and empowerment and they have negative attitudes towards management under females, which prevents them from promoting females to the top despite females being qualified than the men (Harris, 1999: Udegbe, 1997 cited in Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011). Even in recruitment and selection process females are being ignored despite having no difference from a male applicant. Steinpreis, Anders and Ritzke (1999) study about the implication of gender stereotype in the review of curricula vitae of job applicants and tenure candidates revealed that both male and female evaluators showed interest in hiring a male applicant than a female applicant who is equally qualified and the positively evaluate the career contribution of male applicant than a female applicant with an identical record. Similarly, there is discrimination in training and development opportunities for females. There are fewer training and development opportunities given for females in the past which adds to the obstacle in getting a managerial position (Abdullahi, 2006; Ola-Aluko, 2003; Fagenson, 1986; Bevan and Thompson, 1992; Wernick, 1994; Hall, 1995; Burton and Ryall, 1995 cited in Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011). The human capital model stress that employers maximize profit by minimizing cost and investment on training and development for females are considered to be a cost/expense to the firm due to their commitments toward family issues such as absenteeism since they need to carter to the family needs, late comers since they have responsibilities at home

which needs to be completed before they left home for work and comparatively females leave the jobs due to family issues which in turn increases the cost for the organisation (Okafor, Fagbemi and Hassan, 2011).

Subordinate/Peer Perception of Female Leaders

The implicit leadership theory by R. G. Lord and Maher (1991) asserts that an individual's belief on what makes up a leader and non-leader character is based on their personal beliefs and assumptions and this theory becomes important when talking about National Culture as an individual's belief is shaped by value, norms, traits and their experience in the culture in which they operate (Javidan & Carl, 2005, cited in A. M. Bullough, 2008). This shows that the culture in which people operate shapes their expectations from a leader and leaders are affected by the contents of the culture they operate in, such as values, traits, norms and other individuals' expectations (Kevin B. Lowe & Gardner, 2000, cited in A. M. Bullough, 2008). This shows that the leaders' practices should be compatible and accepted within the culture in which they operate, thus proving that culture does change/impact leaders in general.

The survey of 60000 participants conducted by MSNBS indicates that three out of four females prefers to work for a male than female and Poll's survey proclaimed this fact by revealing that half of all adult females in U.S. prefer working for a man (Patil, 2008). Furthermore the research finding of Author (2006) asserts that subordinated has a negative perception toward female superiors. The Ghanaian society presumes managerial positions to be masculine occupation and this attitude impacts the effectiveness of female leaders as the subordinates do not adhere to the instructions from the female superiors and they consider it as an order or punishment whereas the same or similar instruction from male superiors are obeyed and welcomed (Preko, 2012). Similar study was done in Malaysia by Koshal, Gupta and Koshal (1998) and it revealed the same; the careers advancements are constrained by resistance from both male and female subordinates (Preko, 2012). In China, female sales managers are opposed by salesmen than saleswoman (Liu, Xingguo, Haibin, Gongbing & Alan 2001, cited in Preko, 2012).

The above mentioned research outcomes indicates a clear dispute between the national culture and the development of female leaders. Females are willing to grow and explore the opportunity but yet the cultural norms restrict them heavily. The research also indicates that females are naturally transformational leaders but the society's stereotypical practices limits them form exploring their natural skills and talents and to an extent its stops them from practicing their authority.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is aimed at understanding the impact of national culture on women leadership in Oman. The study used both primary and secondary data. An extensive literature review was conducted to understand the various aspects of the research topic. Primary data were collected through in depth interviews. Thirty five Omani female leaders were interviewed to bring out their career experiences as a leader and to analyze the degree to which national culture impacted their career aspirations. The face-to-face "discussion" style enabled to elicit sensitive information. Care was taken to overcome language barriers through use of simple vocabulary. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality and their names and of their organizations were kept anonymous.

Additional data were collected through a validated questionnaire on the degree of acceptance of female leaders, perception on female leaders and willingness to accept leadership positions by the female employees. The questionnaires

were distributed to one hundred and seventy male and one hundred and twenty female employees. The response rate was encouraging at 81%. The data was later analyzed using descriptive and analytical statistical measures in SPSS and AMOS.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data analyses of the interviews reveal some very interesting results. They indicate that cultural norms form an important barrier for female leaders and they had to fight it to get to the level they are right currently in. Females are more willing to take up leadership positions and have the desire to climb to the top level. Contrary to social perceptions and stereotypes, Omani women are highly motivated and ambitious. Their successful transition to elevated positions can be attributed to their early socialization experiences which valued education, supportive parents particularly the father who gave equal treatment to them like their male siblings. Females in Muscat region are open-minded and therefore willing to collaborate with opposite gender for professional growth when compared to females outside the Muscat region. Female leaders have limitations in practicing their authority at work place as a result they are actually forced to be very diplomatic, especially with the male subordinates. This often led them to be ineffective as leaders. It is observed that single females reach the leadership level than the married females. The later cannot take up the extra effort due to barriers form the society and family. These results are in tune with most of the theoretical bases about national culture and female leadership.

The descriptive analyses of the questionnaire data indicate that the majority of the respondents were younger than 35 years of age. Most of the female respondents had bachelor degree, while a majority of male respondents are diploma holders. Both female and male respondents were equally spread in the management level. The results showed that the subordinate/peers perception about female leaders is largely negative. Though both men and women agreed they are comfortable working with the opposite gender, most men preferred working under a male than female leader. Moreover, men strongly believed that females cannot be an effective leader. They further perceive that females are too emotional, shy and reserved to practice their authority. Both men and female opined that in spite of commitments as a leader, females are able to balance their career life with the family life. However, men think that it is not important for females to be employed, while females are most willing to work at top levels. Men believe that it is more important for her to be a mother/wife than taking up a challenging career. This perception was largely influenced by the culture.

CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded national culture does impact the career growth of females at leadership positions in Oman. This research indicate that culture has created a negative perception towards females being a best fit for leadership positions, thus the denial from the organisations, subordinates, peers, superiors and the society as a whole. However, it is observed that women took advantage of every opportunity to prove their capabilities as leaders. They are willing to explore the further opportunities to develop their career to climb up to the top levels setting aside various negative perceptions. They are fighting against all the odds and making their mark in Oman.

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