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PRICKING THE MALE BUBBLE IN ACADEMIA – EXPLORATION OF FEMALE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES IN A NUMBER OF PAKISTAN UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify some relevant key themes, which have emerged from a fieldwork on female academics in Pakistan, which was conducted between 2015 and 2016. The focus of the present research is to explore the experiences of female academic staff in a number of selected Higher Education institution. The investigation goes beyond the formal contractual role boundaries, such as job scope and requirements, and it analyses female academics' experiences in a holistic sense. This is in recognition that the value of female employees is not only defined by the nature of their work roles but also by societal as well as cultural norms. To this end, the analysis of female career progression, in the context of a 'conservative and gendered society', is complemented to the ones of work-life conflict and multiple identities. As for its methodology, the analysis employs qualitative research techniques, such as interviews leading to a thematic analysis of the generated data. Our preliminary results are consistent with the established literature, in so far as they show significant work-life conflict, slower career progression and fewer development and progression opportunities for female academics.

Keywords: female academics, Pakistan, social inclusion, cultural context, multiple identities

¹ Note: Zainab Fakhr is a woman of Pakistani Diaspora who has experience of working in Pakistan Higher Education. It is this personal experience, which provides her valuable insights as a former 'insider', and now an 'outsider', by the virtue of working as a Senior Lecturer in UK higher education, to explore the Pakistani female academic staff experiences.

Introduction

Traditionally, academic investigations on female work experiences have been conducted by “Western” researchers and much of their focus has been on industrially developed. As a result, the literature on female’s working experience in less developed countries is scant and, with the only exception of Malik and Courtney [2011], practically non-existent in the case of Pakistan. The principal aim of this study is to fill this gap with a focus on female academics experiences in the context of Pakistan.

The primary research objective in the present research, a qualitative study, is to explore a number of issues from a female perspective such as the extent of higher education academia gender-bias; difference in perceptions and attitudes towards male v female staff; exploration of the extent of male domination and its impact on the way females are perceived at workplace; and finally to explore the extent of gender inequality that may be leading to job dissatisfaction of female academic staff

The present work is multidisciplinary in its essence and delineates the relationship between rhetoric and experience in selected Pakistani higher education institutions, our work provides new evidence on employees’ perception and, hence, it is related to human resource development practices [Czarnowsky, 2008]. Moreover, as for its focus on Pakistan, it sheds new light on the role of female academic staff in relation to organizational development or/and human resource management practices in higher education in developing countries [Shuck, Wollard, 2010].

Hence, the purpose of this work is to shed light on female academic working experiences in the context of Pakistan. To this end, we will make use of a set of interviews collected in the field, between 2015 and 2016. Data will be analysed thematically providing an overview of “key themes”, which have been enucleated by female academics themselves. The paper starts by providing background information on female academics experience in Pakistan, this is followed a discussion on methodology. The next section presents the main results of discussion and finally further lines of research concludes the paper.

Background

Pakistan has come a long way from the time the country became independent (1947) when it inherited just two universities and like other developing countries is rapidly increasing its Higher Education (HE from here onwards) provision. Today there are 147 degree awarding institutions, of which 82 are the public universities and 65 are private. Student enrolment has risen from 276 000 students in 2002 to 869 000 in 2010 with further increase of 16% in following year with 45% being females, spread across the 5 provinces in Pakistan even though at start of

the present millennium only 2.9% of the population aged between 17–23 years had access to university education. In terms of students, 33% of total student population is female [HEC, 2012].

It would seem that a growing population and an increasing number of higher education providers has resulted in more middle class females students in HE and in over 30% of academic staff in Pakistani universities being female. Most of the academic staff in Pakistani universities is indigenous with a few exceptions [HEC, 2014] but there are also gender disparities. Recent figures from HEC [2013] show that there are 22 231 male faculty members as compared to 10 109 female faculty members in Pakistan's 138 universities. This means that female academics are less than half of their male counterparts. Similarly, if we take out the junior entry level positions, there remain 1841 women, who account only 18% of senior positions (i.e. assistant professors, associate professors and professors); whereas over 30% of male faculty members are on the senior level [Rab, 2014]. Female representation at Vice Chancellor level in Pakistan Higher Education is virtually none. This low proportion of females in the top positions does reflect gender, regional and economic hindrances as well as inequality. Lack of available data on the number of PhDs and the number of female academics at provincial level prevents a more disaggregated analysis [Morley, Crossouard, 2015].

The evidence above provided is supported by Morley and Crossouard [2015] research on under-representation of females in Higher Education (HE) in six South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. In particular, their findings show a clear picture of female inequality in academia. It is worth noticing that, as according to World Economic Forum (2014), all these countries are ranked at the bottom of the Global Gender Gap rank (i.e. from 68 to 141 out of 142 countries) with Pakistan being the penultimate (i.e. 141/142).

Despite the number of female academics has increased in Pakistan over time, Bagilhole and White [2011] underline that the system is still gendered and female academics are restricted to opportunities, career progression and top management positions. Therefore despite some optimism gender inequality remains especially when we look at number of females in senior positions and the strong masculine culture still prevails in society at large [Tlaiss, 2015]. This fact might reflect a societal problem, related to cultural and religious hang-ups. Similarly, the organizational culture of the HE institutions seems to be 'unfriendly' and 'unaccommodating' for women, especially in so far senior positions are involved. Other factors that can contribute to female academics progression are "societal class" as well as "family support." The present research suggests that there are social, economic, institutional and gender barriers which may be preventing females at times from applying for top positions. This is further exacerbated by women experiencing a lack of training, mentorship and networking opportunities as well as lacking family support in terms of mobility. This leads to a fear at times with female staff indicating that leadership is masculine and ruthless and they display a feeling of helplessness. It has also been stated that this may lead some female academics towards rejecting assertiveness and instead identifying and socializing with male managers and even being subservient to them rather for the fear of being isolated.

It has been argued that female academic staff in universities are often denied research opportunities, overburdened with teaching, marginalised and at times deliberately prevented by their male managers from moving into the high echelons of management [Priola, 2004; Mavin *et al.*, 2004]. This is because female staff ‘cannot fit in’ the culture that is male dominated. This has led some scholars to describe these basic inequalities as a ‘double-bind’ which has results in a denial of basic rights such as promotional and other career opportunities. For instance, Baumgartner and Schneider [2010] contend that even those female academic staff who have experienced some success are constantly balling to ‘raze’ the ‘glass ceiling’. Furthermore it has been argued that managers in academia are not immune from gender discriminatory practices despite their high level of education. This is in open contrast with the claim that academics, being more ‘educated people’, should promote gender parity [Handley, 1994]. Following Cockburn [1991], academics’ education might hinder more raw form of discrimination that may be evident in certain sectors of other labour markets.

Further investigation reveals that studies that have taken place in gender inequality often tend to adopt a ‘gender-blind’ approach and therefore they are very much based on traditional masculine stereotype and they do not address the core issues of inequality in academia. It would seem that women in the academic institutions are either invisible or under constant monitoring by their watchful managers rendering their experience uncomfortable [Mavin *et al.*, 2004; Thanacoody *et al.*, 2006; Mavin, 2008]. This strand of the literature suggests that the academic community may not be immune from gender biased practices. In particular, despite the numeric presence of female staff working in academia, it seems that female academics exert little influence on organisational decision-making, due to a “male-skewed” working culture. More politically aware social thinkers contend it is not by accident that this state of affairs has occurred but via a deliberate act of hegemonic male domination [see, for example, Collins, 1986; Haraway, 2000]. These academics and activists argue for a feminist discourse that challenges the male hegemony of institutional power.

Methodology

Data was generated using “snowballing” sampling technique. The role of snowballing or ‘chain’ sampling is used quite often in social sciences and occurs when a respondent refers to another informant since she may have a knowledge of and contact details of a person who is likely to qualify as a possible research participant [Saunders *et al.*, 2013; Bryman, Bell, 2015].

It is also worth highlighting that the interviewees felt glad to be interviewed, in so far as they perceived the interview as an opportunity to discuss issues and experiences, which they might not feel comfortable in sharing with colleagues inside their own institution, even though some formal surveys were carried out periodically on staff experiences. This fact confirms Ramazanoglu and Holland’s

[2007] view that suggests that there is a difference between data production and nature of data being collected. Data production or collection means that information is collected about some physical aspects or there are some facts lying somewhere and the researcher has to spot them whereas nature of data being collected indicates that the researcher is gathering information in a social process of giving meaning to the social world. Similarly, the theories of social construction also suggest that human agent or some social force is producing the data – most feminist research would tend to fall into this category. Data generation happens when the researcher is being reflective about her own experiences within a social context shared equally by the respondents. Thus, data stems from facts, knowledge, experience, ideas as well as social constructs.

Sample characteristics

The respondents in the present research were female academics from various universities in the four different provinces of Pakistan i.e. Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Phuktoon Khwa (KPK). The sample consisted of 16 female academics from 8 universities with 4 interviews being conducted in KPK which is a conservative part of Pakistan where females often cover their heads with *chador* (head cover) in public places and employment rate amongst females is confined to the middle classes; 2 interviewees were conducted from university staff in Quetta in Baluchistan which is almost as conservative as KPK with very few females in the workforce. Four interviews were conducted from Sind province and six from Punjab. These two provinces are much more liberal in the context of Pakistan with a relatively higher female working population. Dress code in these two provinces is much more liberal which in some may reflect staff attitudes.

The overall respondent sample consists of Associate Researchers, Lecturers and Senior Lecturers, Assistant Professors, Associate Professors and Professors. Two of the respondents are Heads of Department. Respondents work in 8 different universities and, as already explained, have been identified via snowball sampling. One respondent, a Sociologist, is an expat of the Pakistani Diaspora and currently based in a university in Saudi Arabia. It was decided to include her since she had extensive experience of teaching in Pakistan. It is also worth noticing that several interviewees obtained their PhDs from abroad (i.e. New Zealand, UK and Malaysia).

Discussion and analysis

Thematic analysis focuses on examining themes within data and goes beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text and moves on to identifying implicit and explicit ideas within the data. The main advantage of thematic analysis is

that it is a very useful method for capturing complex meaning and relations within data, the main disadvantage relies in its likely subjectivity [Guest, McQueen, 2012].

The key themes that have emerged from the interviews are the following: work-life conflict; lack of opportunities; societal and religious constraints; lack of female role models in senior positions due to glass ceiling; multiple identities; male dominance and gender discrimination; lack of management support and career frustration. On a general level, most female academics were committed to their profession and academic life since it gave them a sense of freedom, which resulted in personal satisfaction as well as provided them financial independence. However there was also a recognition that due to high unemployment in the country they could easily be replaced by a male staff member. There was a common view that policy rhetoric about equality of employment opportunities was restricted to Committees and there was little evidence of this in practice. There was also a view that males are considered to be the breadwinners in family settings as they often had to take care of not only their immediate family but their parents and younger siblings. Institutions preferred male staff since they will not miss work due to child rearing responsibilities. There appeared to be less support and facilitation of female academic staff requirements in male dominated institutions; an example being a lack of childcare centers in the institute or not enough flexibility in working hours. There was view amongst almost all respondents that there was an urgent need for role models in higher education and that there remained an aspect of maleness in most academic institutions. Qualitative change is likely to have been made when these staff were to be found at all levels within the institutions. This view resonates with that of Kanter [1997] who states that that minority groups i.e. women within the organization need to form alliances and support each other. This is perhaps understandable in that those who experiencing discrimination or marginalised by an uncaring society i.e. *victims*, are likely to come together and challenge the hegemony of the powerful i.e. *status quo*.

According to Mavin [2006] women in senior management position act as role models and mentors for other women working in the organisation and help other females to develop and grow to raise their profiles. However in earlier writings Mavin [2001] warned us that there is at times lack of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour as women in top position do not want to take responsibility of other women or to be their representatives and become more male than men in their attitude to other women which leads to negative behaviour and female misogyny. This, at times, leads to women in senior positions try to create hurdles and problem as they side with the male counterparts to be accepted and they think that if they have achieved success the hard way, others should be doing the same. In doing so they sometime create barriers for other women and are unhelpful which is referred to 'queen bee' behaviour. Staines *et al.* [1973] describes this as the 'queen bee' syndrome which contends that women in senior positions become critical of other females and make it difficult for other females to work and progress. Women in these higher position ally with the male counterparts at the senior level and defend gender bias either openly or behind closed doors. These women achieve

their higher position in the male dominated work place and ultimately turn against other women. Research findings from the interviews resonate with these views.

There were also some green shoots of resistance where a number of respondents indicated that after years of fighting on many fronts they had developed tools of resistance by becoming vocal exponents for equal opportunities in academia as well as at domestic level. The first base of resistance was with parents where male education, despite many being having a middle class upbringing, was prioritised especially in certain careers where the fees were higher. This was legitimised by cultural and religious values which were deep rooted in Pakistan. However a number of respondents proposed meeting in autonomous groups to prick the male bubble where ideas could be exchanged freely and commonality of experiences shared. Several respondents indicated that whilst they may not be able to turn the tide of history, which was heavily loaded in favour men, they could resist some of the basic inequalities which were to be found in academia.

Conclusions and further lines of research

The present research provides an overview of the emerging themes around female academics in Pakistan. In particular, the results show the relevance of gender inequality, lack of career progression and frustrations, work-life conflict, multiple identities and societal perception. In particular, our results indicate that Pakistani academia is gender biased, that male and female staff are treated differently which goes on to impinge female career progression militates against female job satisfaction. The present findings concur with published view that gender disparity is much more noticeable in South Asia especially in Pakistan. For instance, according to The World Economic Forum (2014) Pakistan currently ranks almost lowest out of 58 countries progressing towards gender equality despite the existence of legislations pertaining equal rights to male and female in place of work. This is a reflection of the society which contrasts between the traditionalists, barring women freedom and the liberals who advocate equal and progressive feminine role in democratic process. Research shows that most of the female academics working in higher education face discrimination at work thus resulting in lower job satisfaction. It has generally been observed that women are not included in critical decision making processes which results in mistrust, underestimation and uncertainty in women. In Pakistan, women are victims of gender inequality in most walks of life and the capabilities of women are undermined. They are expected to be only good house wives not good working persons. Therefore, the decision making remains to be a prerogative of men when it comes to the matters of policy formulation [Singh, 2008].

Due to the inter-disciplinary nature of the emerging themes, this paper opens a wide spectrum of research paths. For example, it would be interesting to quantify the likely wage gap between female and male academics as well as to disentangle its determinants. Further, it will be useful to evaluate, in monetary terms,

the trade-off between working and family commitments for female academics as well as to understand such a trade-off from a more sociological perspective.

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