Diversity Management: Towards a Theory of Gender Sensitive Practices

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Abstract

The resource-based view of the organization conceptualizes diversity as a valuable, scarce and difficult to imitate resource. The phenomenon of diversity, specifically gender diversity, is fast becoming an inevitable reality for the contemporary organizations as an increasing number of female workers are joining the formal work force both in the developed as well as the developing world. While ample focus exists upon recruitment, managerial training and a change in overall culture of the organization for effective diversity management, empirical research to study the share of organizational practices in creating a conducive (or hostile) work climate for the newer variety of workers remains sparse. This qualitative research study, conducted in the public sector using the Federal Civil Service of Pakistan as the context, purported to examine the role of organizational practices in the overall agenda of managing (or mismanaging) diversity in the organizations. It was revealed from the empirical data of this study that the so called 'gender neutral' practices of the organizations, pertaining to face-time system24/7, job rotation and training & development, are in fact thoroughly oriented towards the traditional male worker and evidently responsible for creating a significant stumbling block in the job performance of female employees. It was also found that the organizations' bid to cater the heterogeneous work force of today with the homogeneous policies of yesterday is in direct discord with the basic tenet of diversity management pertaining to acknowledging, supporting and appreciating the heterogeneous perspectives and proves counterproductive in carrying out the diversity agenda. The paper discusses policy implications in view of the changing landscape of our work organizations and emphasizes on diversity management practices using gender sensitive rather than gender neutral practices at workplace.

Keywords: Diversity management, Gender sensitive, Gender neutral, Heterogeneous work force, Homogeneous policies, Federal Civil Service.

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Introduction

The globalized economy and the resulting heightened competition in the corporate sector have brought the importance of work force diversity to the fore. Diverse competencies, varied perspectives and range of skills are considered an important competitive edge in today's business institutions. Richard (2000) taking the resource-based view of the organization, conceptualizes diversity as a valuable, scarce and difficult to imitate resource. Diversity in the work force, is defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC, USA)as differences in gender, racial-ethnicity, and age and has no longer been an option but an inevitable feature of contemporary organizations. Diverse work force is considered an apt response to the diverse customers / markets resulting from internationalization of businesses and a valuable resource for the organizations with a learning and creative orientation.

A growing body of research has linked the productive organizational processes and outcomes such as group performance, creativity, problem solving with diverse pool of talent in the work force (Williams & O' Reilly, 1998; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).Higher staff motivation and retention; reduced recruitment costs; improved employer image and an improved talent pool have been enumerated as the direct benefits of diversity policies (Rajan, 2003).Accordingly, working through diversity to the best of their advantage has become a strategic imperative for many organizations that have an agenda to profit from the expanding opportunities and reaping the full potential of this vicissitude. Top five reasons for the pursuit of diversity management initiative reported in a survey of Fortune 100 companies comprised: better utilization of talent, increased marketplace understanding, enhanced breadth of understanding in leadership positions, enhanced creativity and increased quality of team problem-solving (Diversity Rationale Poll cited by Robinson & Dechant, 1997).However, simply having a diverse work force or generating a wider pool of talent does not guarantee the competitive advantage associated with diversity unless effective diversity management practices are implemented and a conducive work climate is created to foster the optimum utilization of diverse human resources irrespective of gender.

Organizations vary in their orientations towards diversity as well as its management. Diversity is perceived as regulatory compliance, as social justice, as the responsibility of only part of the organization, such as HR, as a strategic planning outcome, or as a community-focused activity (McMahon, 2006). Differences in the perception about diversity dictate the amount of responsiveness the organizations are willing to display in supporting the differing needs of a diverse work force (Hastings,

2006). Many organizations may appear diverse because of their compliance with various equal employment legislations; yet, they are not necessarily reaping the perceived benefits of this diversity due to their lack of understanding about and response towards diversity management issues and challenges.

According to the literature about best practices to manage diversity in organizations, the management and leadership perspectives about diversity need to be redefined (Jones, 1989) along with a change in the overall organizational culture in order to make diverse talent pool a competitive advantage. It talks about the need for an appropriate level of commitment, strategy, communication, and concrete changes in organizational structure and processes (Kreitz, doctoral thesis, 2008) for building and sustaining diversity. Thomas (1992; p. 10) advocates fora "comprehensive managerial process for developing an environment that works for all employees" (Thomas, 1992, p.10).It, however, remains to be empirically investigated whether organizations actually strive to change their processes and practices, and to what extent,as a response to the divergent needs of a diverse work force.

Theory of Gendered Practices in Organizations

The minimal participation in the work force of about half of the world's population has been explained through the concept of 'occupational closure' (Parkin, 1974) which predicating the professional arena with purely masculine identity and ideology has worked to deprive it of a valuable phenomenon of diversity in skills, attitudes and capacities. The marginalization of feminine gender and their exclusion from the mainstream economic activity is tantamount to wastage of precious human resource which if managed properly and efficiently can extend a valuable contribution to the world's overall economic and social well-being.

A vast amount of literature attempting to explain the mechanism of women's marginalization in the work place through various theoretical approaches (Kanter, 1977; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Crompton, 1997; Alvesson & Due Billing, 2009; Calas & Smircich, 2006; Poggio, 2006) has identified a number of organizational processes apparently responsible for continued incidence of gender discrimination in the work place. The discriminatory organizational practices not only limit the desired movement of talent between organizational ranks, but also reportedly impact the quality of employees' organizational experiences rendering less-positive attitudes of female employees toward their jobs and less engagement in their work (Ensher, Grant-Vallone & Donaldson, 2001 cited by Welle & Heilman, 2005).

In the context of gender discrimination, a line of theorizing that has captured the attention of contemporary researchers explains the phenomenon of gender segregation through structural factors. According to this reasoning, the structures of the labor market and of society in general are responsible to produce and reproduce gender asymmetries in the world of work and organizations (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1992). Gender relations are practiced at many levels of the organizational structures and practices, varying from the explicit to the more subtle, including the ways in which work is organized, defined, rewarded and represented (Edwards & Wajcman, 2005). According to Bobbit-Zeher (2011), discrimination needs to be considered a part of the overall process of the larger gender system in order to obtain a fuller comprehension. This entails investigating the cultural view of gender ideology, the structural aspects of organizations that segregate gender, formal policies and the attitude as well as the behaviors of institutional actors who initiate and enforce such policies in everyday work practices. Moss Kanter (1977) asserts that gender differences in organizational behavior are due to structure rather than the characteristics of men and women as individuals and gendering occurs in the practices of organizations such as division of labor, of allowed behavior, of power, of locations in the physical space (Kanter, 1977), as well as in social interactions. Kanter observed that, "While organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines, masculine principles were dominating their authority structures" (Kanter, 1977, p.46).

The concept of practice has gained wider recognition among contemporary sociological theory and research enabling gender to be conceived as a situated social practice realized through social interaction (Poggio, 2006). The idea of gender as a practice has been advanced by many authors. Gherardi (1994) applied this perspective to the study of gender and posited that attention should be given to how gender is "done" at work and how organizations "do" gender. Martin (2003, 2006) observed gendering processes in organizations in terms of two-sided dynamic: gendering practices, and the practicing of gender (Poggio, 2010).

Acker (1990; 1992) noted how the rules and procedures in the organization and accepted norms of behavior are based on the idea of a gender-neutral "ideal" worker whose characteristics of full-time availability, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities and high career orientation match more with the stereotypic characteristics of men workers than those of women workers in day to day reality. While searching for practices of gender at the individual and institutional level of the organization, Claring bould and Knoppers (2012) identified three paradoxical practices that serve to sustain the gender scarcity in an organization: *gender neutrality* where men and women do not realize the existence of gender practicing and continue

to behave in accordance with this view; *gender normalcy* where gender inequality is considered inevitable and a normal practice so nothing is done to redress the situation; and thirdly, *gender passivity* when people actually contribute to inclusion and exclusion of men and women by remaining passive and not taking an action.

Diversity literature promulgates an ample focus upon recruitment, managerial training, and a change in overall culture of the organization for effective diversity management however, empirical research to study the share of organizational practices in creating a conducive (or hostile) work climate for the newer variety of workers remains sparse. The practices, rules and regulations and accepted norms of behavior in an organization can have a far reaching impact on the diversity management agenda of the organizations owing to their significant influence on the work related attitudes and performance of the employees. This research study has therefore attempted to empirically investigate the element of discrimination and / or neutrality in the organizational ways 'in which work is organized, defined, rewarded and represented' and its role in diversity management (or mismanagement) from the perspective of making work climate responsive to varying needs of a diverse work force. An insight into the part played by the organizational practices in catalyzing diversity management can help organizations to capitalize upon the diverse human resources by way of creating a work environment that allows the differences to flourish and is effectively responsive to the divergent needs of the employees there by avoiding the unproductive costs associated with diversity mismanagement. The empirical data of this study has been analyzed to answer the following research question:

Whether and to what extent the organizations endeavor to make their practices, processes and work climate responsive to the differing requirements of a diverse work force?

Research Methodology

The research question was investigated by way of mapping the career progression of both male and female employees and gauging their perceptions about the organizational practices / processes and the work climate in terms of their responsiveness (unresponsiveness) to varying needs of a diverse work force. A qualitative research strategy was deemed appropriate and the data were collected through semi-structured interviews centered around four topics: perceptions of professional fitness in terms of gender, supporting / hampering factors in career progression, equality of opportunities for training and/or promotions, and performance evaluation methodology and criteria.

Population / Sample:

Civil Superior Service (CSS) Pakistan, a large public sector organization comprising twelve occupational groups that encompass almost all the realm of public service in the country (list attached at A) was selected as the population of this study. The women compete in the service on open merit whereas a quota of 10% has also been introduced for women in addition to open merit for each occupational group. CSS being a diverse organization in terms of representation of women in all the occupational groups, even unconventional ones like Police Service (PSP) and Administrative Service (PAS), was considered an apt setting for studying the organizational practices and their impact upon the experiences of a gender diverse work force.

As per the conventions of qualitative research strategy, a sample of male and female officers was taken purposively from mostly the middle and top management positions of various groups (except for PSP where most of the women are in entry level grade owing to their recent induction in the group) to ensure that they have the requisite information available for meeting the research objectives. The groups were sampled according to women's density as well as their representation in top management positions to account for the element of diversity. The respondents were accessed through connections and networking for the requisite interviews and the data were collected till the saturation point where no new information was forthcoming. The final sample consisted of twenty respondents, ten male and ten female from various groups of the CSS.

Data Analysis

The data collected through in-depth interviews were mostly tape recorded (except for a couple of interviews where interviewees did not feel comfortable with recording their voices) and transcribed later. The data were processed through NVivo-10 (computer software used to analyze the qualitative data). Using the comparative analytic method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), the data were read and re-read a number of times to identify the relevant quotes. These quotes were then compared with the other interviews for similarity and assigned an appropriate label or a code. For data reduction, the common codes appearing in various interviews were grouped together under a theme.

Results / discussion

'Gender neutrality' emerged as the most prominent theme in the empirical data of this study as almost all the respondents, both male and female, were in complete accord on the point that there was no gender discrimination in CSS and the organizational practices were completely 'gender neutral'. Vehemently denying the phenomenon of 'glass ceiling' in female officers' advancement, one of the female participants contended that "…in civil services I have not so far encountered any such barrier; I do not think it is a problem in our service". Another lady officer in top management position asserted that, "I think glass ceiling is a misconception; we should not blame others for our shortcomings". In the words of another female interviewee, "[In our service] People do not look at you like men or women, they look at you as officers which gives you a sense of comfort in your work and help you grow". The opinions of male officers were not very different. According to one male officer, "if they [women] themselves do not show reservations, there is no difference in the development of their career. If not better, they certainly have an equal opportunity for progression". Another male interviewee strongly rejecting the idea of gender discrimination supplied that, "…one of the most powerful and competent civil servant is a lady these days. They send her wherever there is a problem and they need solution".

The above perception of 'gender neutrality', according to Claringbould and Knoppers (2012), implies that men and women do not realize the existence of gender practicing and continue to behave in accordance with this view. The assertions like "they do not look at you as men and women they look at you as officers" clearly credit the contention of Acker (1992) that gender neutral practices visualize the worker as "disembodied abstraction of an ideal worker", where the characteristics and attributes of this abstraction are more similar to male than those of a female who is quite encumbered with her family responsibilities in terms of time and commitment. A disembodied worker, as per the organizational logic, "…cannot have other imperatives of existence that impinge upon the job… the concept of "a job" is "thus implicitly a gendered concept, even though organizational logic presents it as gender neutral" (Acker, 1990; p. 149).

Analysis of the empirical data of this study revealed a number of incidences where neutrality of organizational practices was responsible for creating a lag in the female performance and a barrier in the upward progression of their careers. Most prominent among those were the explicit requirement of 'beyond-full-time-availability' in the work place, 'field postings' and 'off-the-job training' as elaborated below:

The 'visibility' demand of the Service was strongly endorsed by both male and female officers of CSS in their statements such as:"If you need to succeed, then this is 24/7 job if you take it as a 9 to 5 job, you will be sidelined. No gazette holidays, no weekends; you have to work up to the world's schedule"; "There is no concept of holidays in the service; consider it a 24-hours service" and "At subdivision level, you have to work day and night; no timings are there to follow".

The practice of '24/7 presence' in the Service, though considered gender neutral by the incumbents, evidently exerts undue stress on female employees who unlike 'unencumbered' male counterparts have multiple responsibilities to meet and expectations to serve, especially in the context of Pakistan's Masculine society (Hofstede, 1984) where women toil to fulfill the demands of their professional life in addition to their primary responsibility of family care, elderly care and the household. The explicit requirement of almost all the occupational groups of CSS for 'beyond-full-time availability' of the officers, irrespective of their gender, may also be categorized as the organizational practice of 'doing' gender (Martin 2003, 2006) as it implies automatic exclusion of females who will obviously be in a hardship to meet this requirement in view of their domestic responsibilities towards their children and family. However, this gendered practice is considered 'normal' by both male and female respondents of this study depicting an attitude of 'gender normalcy' (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2012),and therefore, no challenge or protest as such is forthcoming from the female officers who somehow try to meet this demand, with extra hardship, and try to act at par with their male counterparts. As narrated by one of the female officers of PAS, "I remember in my night duties, I used to take them [children] along and they used to sleep in the car. And I did that because that was what I wanted to do! I enjoyed doing that [work] and my husband supported me in that". And the ones who could not extend their working hours due to family and/or parenting reasons felt guilty about it. As one female officer admitted,"… domestic responsibilities, which are considered a primary obligation of a female, sometimes make a difference. There are some times in your professional life when you feel that it is difficult to do your job the way you want to; at that time you feel that maybe men are doing a better job by being able to give more time…".

It is acknowledged in the literature that such type of 'visibility' and time demand creates a lot of pressure in terms of work / life balance even for males and is regarded a major obstacle in the way of female workers who are aspiring to reach up to the level of decision making positions. It is believed that the family-friendly policies aimed to increase women's presence in the highest managerial positions need to be preceded by a change in the assumptions about the requirement of working hours which at present is largely unregulated specially at the top management level (Lyon & Woodward, 2004). In the words of Muzio and Tomlinson (2012, p. 460), structural and normative constraints such as "…combinations of long working hours, training requirements, after hours networking and cultivating client relations remain critical to career advancement" and "constrain women's career histories more often than men's".

In the context of this study, the 'face-time system' (Poggio, 2010), attaching more value to physical presence in the work place as compared to meeting performance targets, is evidently considered a remarkable feat accomplished by the male employees and ignored by the females which ultimately serve to affect their comparable worth as a useful human resource. As opined candidly by a male officer in the top management position, "Physical and mental capacity, endurance, working, learning and unlearning, I don't see and I have never found any difference in male and female officers. But difference does appear due to these factors ultimately when I have to be there in the field for my duties at 12 at night and I'm there, and my performance would be visible; and when a female is not able to be there due to some domestic reason, the outcome would be different. That might reflect on our competency and delivery of service ultimately".

Certain informal interventions have been reported by both the female and male respondents whereby the female incumbents are facilitated by their bosses through 'exemption from late sittings' and allowing 'relaxed postings' with reduced work load to cater their family needs besides a formal wed-lock policy where the women can request to be posted at the posting place of their husband. However, it has been observed from the accounts of the interviewees that these interventions are granted and accepted as favors and are not backed by the corresponding changes in the performance evaluation and / or reward systems. Due to which, these practices yield a limited utility and actually prove counterproductive for the females' careers in the long run by resulting into loss of visibility, marginalization, and deficient human capital in terms of experience and exposure.

Similarly, the requirement of 'field postings' in various groups of CSS is a convenient practice for male officers who can easily relocate with or without their family and amass the vital experience and exposure required for further progression in their careers. On the other hand, females constrained by societal norms and family responsibilities are not at a liberty to accept such opportunities hence rendered deficient on the criteria of promotion to the next grades. The occupational groups like PAS, PSP and Foreign Service (FSP) are considered elitist in CSS due to the powers attached as well as their faster track of career progression, yet females appear less inclined to opt for these groups because of the difficulty to fulfill the requirement of field postings due to their family responsibilities (Jabeen and Jadoon, 2013).One female officer from the Customs group stated that, "I was on merit to go into the District Management Group (DMG) (now PAS) but I opted for Customs to avoid outside postings. In the Customs group, you stay in the big cities". And "Foreign Service was highly appealing, but I thought that maintaining a family life with that kind of postings would rather be difficult; I wanted to have both career and a family so I decided to opt for an office job," was the comment of another lady officer.

The female 'reservations' about the field postings is regarded quite critically by their male counterparts who seem to have a very strong contention about women coming to the profession and then selecting them out of the difficult situations. "If we talk of equal rights and equality of gender, then why they [women] should be exempted; we have joined the same service. …Women accept the foreign postings happily but decline the interprovincial transfers," complained one male interviewee. In the opinion of another male officer, "Women don't take field postings even when they come to DMG (PAS now), they opt for secretariat postings". Such statements casting aspersions on women's professional attitude reinforce the stereotypes of their lacking motivation and career orientation as working women.

Off-the-job trainings / courses are another mandatory requirement of the Service especially for the promotions to the next grade and in the words of a lady officer, "We have to face a set-back due to family issues like I am delaying my Senior Management Course (training course) which is conducted at Lahore, and I cannot at this time relocate due to my youngest child's education, and this course is essential for my next promotion".

The tendency of women to decline field postings and / or trainings and preferring to remain in the big cities for the sake of keeping their families together evidently contributes to depreciating their value as a resource. It makes them lose ground on the career front in terms of their reduced visibility, lesser variety of experience, and lesser professional development which, in turn, causes them to losing mainstream and becoming excluded As stated by a lady officer of PAS: "…if the females do not opt for mainstream postings, if they put their own career on hold for two to three years for the sake of the career of their husbands, if they hesitate to take on the opportunities of a variety of experience for the sake of their household duties or their young children, then definitely they stagnate in their career and may be left behind their male colleagues". In the words of amale colleague, "When they do not accept the remote postings, then the seats/vacancies in the big cities start choking and the number of lady officers exceeds the male officers in those cities; then they (majority) have to go home early or the children come to the office. Senior officers do not like this situation and they crib about it".

Conclusion / recommendations

It appears from the analysis of the primary data of this study that the policy initiatives like Equal Employment Opportunities and Affirmative Action, meant to encourage the inclusion of marginalized sections including females in the formal employment, tended to achieve the target up to a limited level where they have succeeded in opening the doors for the new entrants: however, the climate of the workplaces has evidently remained unchanged and for the most part unwelcoming for the new variety of workers. An increasing number of female employees are being inducted in the service and also appreciated and acknowledged for their competent performance however, once appointed, they are left on their own to manage and survive the duress and hardship arising out of the so called 'gender neutral' practices, that are evidently tilted quite heavily towards the traditional, 'unencumbered male workers'. Females appear constrained to avail the opportunities of accumulating human capital and / or professional development on account of their domestic / parenting responsibilities and ultimately fall short on the requisite eligibility criteria of progression in the Service and trail behind their male counterparts. The sluggish pace of their career as compared to their male colleagues, despite their equal or sometimes superior capabilities, evidently creates dissatisfaction and a demotivated attitude among females barring them from contributing their full potential on the job and perpetuating the stereotype of having lesser ambition or career orientation.

It can be inferred from the above discussion that the seemingly diverse organizations have accomplished to embrace diversity to the extent of acquisition practices only, i.e., recruiting and selecting from the diverse pool of employees. However, the practices pertaining to utilizing and retaining this diversity are still removed from the basic tenets of diversity management that require the differences to be accommodated and flourished. The 'disembodied' nature of jobs, branded with purely masculine identity, is inconsistent with the differing needs and requirements of the female employees and their 'issues' and 'reservations' arising out of these discordant practices are tolerated with a frown but not respected or accommodated.

It may, therefore, be pertinent to propose in the light of the above analysis that the organizations seeking to attain the competitive advantage of gender diversity need to adopt a strategic approach which goes beyond hiring a gender-diverse work force and encompasses optimal utilization as well as retention of this diversity. This would entail framing a flexible set of policies and practices which could be duly responsive to the differing needs and demands of a diverse work force providing them with equal opportunities of professional development and career growth. The 'gender neutrality' of organizational practices pertaining to allocation and retention of human resources is proposed to be replaced with 'gender sensitivity', where the varying demands of a heterogeneous work force are perceived and acknowledged for an appropriate response without censure, and an optimum utilization of diverse talents is pursued in the wake of the strategic agenda of diversity management.

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