

A Study of Thai Female Executives: Perceived Barriers to Career Advancement

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the barriers to career advancement from the perspective of Thai female executives. Data were collected based on semi-structured interviews with 30 female executives in senior management positions. The results indicated that career barriers ranged from individual to interpersonal, organizational and societal factors. Individual factors were related to personality traits such as being emotional, work-family balance issues, and a lack of career aspiration. Interpersonal factors included difficult relationships at work and the old boys' network. At the organizational level, discriminatory organizational culture and human resource practices were perceived to be a hindrance, while at the societal level, gender role stereotypes and social attitudes towards women were viewed as key obstacles to career advancement.

Key words: barriers, career, discrimination, Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent survey reported that the proportion of women in senior positions in the Asia Pacific region was 20%, slightly below the global average of 22% (Grant Thornton, 2015). On the basis of over 5,400 interviews across 35 economies, the report suggested that there were various barriers impeding the advancement of women and such barriers arose from social norms, gender bias and business practices. In the case of Thailand, the proportion of female executives stood at 27% (Grant Thornton, 2015). While this proportion may be above the global average, Thai women remain under-represented in senior management. As Thai women attempt to reach top management level, what are the obstacles en route to the top? The current study attempts to address this research question.

While it is not unheard of for Thai women to achieve the position of 'senior executive', the path to the top is not easy and numerous obstacles must be overcome if success is to be achieved. Even when a relatively senior position is reached there may still be difficulties ahead as some research studies have suggested (Lyness & Thompson, 1997). A review of a number of empirical studies on women's advancement reveals that women are still significantly under-represented at top management level worldwide (Rowley & Yukongdi, 2009; The World Bank Group, 2014). In Asia, cultural heritage has placed women in secondary or supporting roles to men, such as homemaker, mother or nurturer which reflects a form of sex role ideology (Chow, 2005; Ismail et al., 2005;

Koshal et al., 1998). Yet, there are notable examples of Asian developing countries in which some women have managed to reach senior positions. Thailand is one such example (Yukongdi, 2009) and is the focal point for the present study.

The current study aims to identify the barriers encountered by women as they scale the corporate ladder. Through in-depth interviews, the study seeks to gain an insight into the career experience and behavior of a small number of women, specifically, how these women have managed to break the glass ceiling and to reach the top of their respective professions.

The following sections present the theoretical approach in women in management research, a review of the literature on women in management, the methodology employed for the current study followed by the results, discussion and conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH IN WOMEN IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

A review of the literature indicates that the career progress of women is affected by factors at the individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal levels (see Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). These factors are interrelated and simultaneously have an impact on women's career advancement (Fagenson, 1990). This multi-level framework provides the basis for reviewing the literature and analyzing the data.

Accordingly, the literature review is organized on the basis of four levels of analysis: individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal. The factors within each level that will be drawn upon to explain female executives' barriers to career progress (Metz, 2003; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989) are explained briefly as follows: Individual factors refer to the sources of power the individual brings to a position in an organization and such factors include family variables (e.g. marital status, number of children), personality traits (e.g. ambition, masculinity) and human capital factors (e.g. social class, education, training and development). Interpersonal factors relate to the relationship amongst individuals within the context of their positions in the organization. Interpersonal variables include mentor support, male hierarchy, career encouragement, career breakthrough opportunities and internal networks. Organizational factors include policies, practices, structure and culture which in turn influence individual behavior. Societal variables focus on the society at large and the roles and expectations that develop within it (e.g. religion, societal beliefs and values, politics, culture and legislation) (Metz, 2003; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989). Given Asian countries' distinctiveness, the review of the literature will focus on women in Asian societies. The following section examines the research literature pertaining to career advancement and the barriers that women face, based on the four levels of analysis.

3. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

3.1 Individual factors. A review of the literature indicated that in China, women entered into management via their personal or family network, or *Guanxi* in Chinese. The ability to create informal relationships was more crucial for the career mobility of

females than that for males (Cooke, 2006). A study conducted in Hong Kong found that career success for both men and women was attributed to having an individual working attitude, effective communication skills and problem solving skills (Ng & Pine, 2003). In addition for women, being hard working and having job knowledge were rated as next most important. In Singapore, female hotel managers identified factors that contributed to their success were related to education and work experience, leadership skills, strength of determination and hard work. In contrast, a lack of extended family support was perceived to block their career advancement. Mother-in-laws and husbands placed pressure on women to perform their traditional family roles. Women felt that managing the egos of their spouses was one of the difficulties they faced as they progressed in their career (Li & Leung, 2001).

In Thailand, a study indicated that personal characteristics of patience, sincerity, honesty, consensus, persistence, flexibility and a willingness to learn were mentioned as necessary attributes linked to career success (van der Boon, 2003). Other studies found social class rather than gender as a facilitator to female career advancement (Yukongdi, 2005; van der Boon, 2003). A higher social standing provided women with greater access to education and employment opportunities. Having nannies and housemaids provided women with greater opportunity to take on more demanding roles associated with higher level management positions. Thus, these factors were found to be facilitators, the lack of which would be barriers to career success.

3.2 Interpersonal factors. The interpersonal dimension is viewed as a key criterion for Asian professionals and particularly important in many collectivist societies in Asia (see Hofstede, 1980; 1993). In China, the quality of personal relationship with one's boss and colleagues has been found to be a contributing factor to career success (Cooke, 2006).

With respect to barriers, women in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, and India reported that the old boy's network was a critical barrier to career progress (Budhwar et al., 2006; Kang & Rowley, 2006; Yuasa, 2006; Li & Leung, 2001). In India, women's exclusion from the 'male-club' network prevented them from developing the ability to handle organizational politics and ultimately attaining the top position (Budhwar et al., 2006). Furthermore, the Indian male ego, originating from gender stereotype, was a serious barrier. Women reported that this barrier required interpersonal skills to manage such an issue (Budhwar et al., 2006). Similarly, Malaysian women believed in the establishment of networking for their career progress (Ismail et al., 2005). But for Singaporeans, lack of professional network was linked to societal factors. The country's cultural values restricted female managers from entertaining their business associates in private clubs or well-known exclusive male places. As a result of such exclusion, female managers had limited opportunity to socialize with influential executives (usually male) who could support their career development (Li & Leung, 2001).

Thai culture was found to be high on femininity (Hofstede, 1980a; 1993). For women, possessing 'Thai lady' personality traits was an advantage in dealing with others, which somewhat contradicted the West's masculine style of leadership (Yukongdi, 2009). Senior women utilized their interpersonal skills and emphasized lobbying and networking. Thai women chose to employ a non-confrontational approach which they

regarded to be an easier path to promotion (van der Boon, 2003; Yukongdi, 2005). One of the key strategies women used was to develop strong relationships with powerful men in the organization (Virakul, 2000).

3.3 Organizational factors. At the organizational level, certain workplace practices have been reported to be impediments for women's career advancement. Research indicates that there is a greater acceptance of inequality in society in Asian countries (Hofstede, 1980; 1993; House et al., 2004), which tend to be characterised by high power distance and low gender egalitarianism.

Female managers in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, India and Thailand reported that women were allocated specialist or secondary roles, whilst men were assigned to decision-making positions and key areas of the business. Such practice tended to create male-dominated organizational structure in senior management. In consequence, men often found it difficult to adjust their paradigm and were less likely to accept female colleagues in the same position of power as themselves (Simeon et al., 2001; Kang & Rowley, 2006; Yuasa, 2006; Yukongdi, 2009).

In India, a study found that in contrast to men, women were perceived to be less assertive, less competitive and less aggressive in making tough decisions. As a result, women were assigned to work in supporting roles whereas men were appointed to line management jobs (Budhwar et al., 2006). This might be the reason why Indian women said that they had to work harder and longer to prove their capabilities (Budhwar et al., 2006).

From Ng and Pine's study (2003), Hong Kong women working in the hotel business admitted that organizational attitudes of favoring men as managers was the biggest obstacle to achieving equal promotional opportunities. In addition, a lack of support system, lack of equity in promotion, inadequate job knowledge and lack of mentoring were top of their list of career barriers. Sexual harassment, being married and childcare responsibilities were perceived as obstacles. Both women and men reported that they preferred male supervisors, while male bosses were more comfortable supervising male rather than female subordinates (Ng & Pine, 2003). In Japan, evidence suggested that the major impediments faced by women seeking to attain senior positions were childcare responsibilities, the burden of housework, job tenure, education and taking a period out of the workforce (Simeon et al., 2001; Yuasa, 2006).

In a study of Thai women, they perceived that they were offered fewer advancement opportunities compared to their male colleagues (Yukongdi, 2005). Discriminatory organizational practices against women were evident in recruitment and promotion. In terms of hiring practices, there was a preference to hire men and unmarried women. Due to the small proportion of Thai women in senior positions (Yukongdi, 2005; Benson & Yukongdi, 2006; Yukongdi, 2009) men tended to dominate corporate boards. Processes for selection and promotion to senior positions were generally determined by male-dominated committees in the public sector. Qualified women were likely to have less chance of attaining the position due to the male-dominated selection process (UNDP, 2006). As such, discriminatory human resources policies and practices were a contributing factor to gender disparity in organizations.

3.4 Societal factors. Research evidence suggested that societal factors were perceived to be core barriers more so than having a positive impact on women's career advancement. A study in China reported that leadership was regarded as a man's role and women were considered unsuitable for such a position (Cooke, 2006). A woman who was more successful in her career than her husband was not recognised by others. The study found that it was difficult for career women to network with their male colleagues or superiors in social activities. Moreover, a female employee might have a male mentor due to a lack of senior women able to perform this role. But such perceived close relationship might result in rumours and later become damaging for the female employee's reputation (Cooke, 2006).

In Hong Kong, women clarified their main barriers as work-family conflict, the old boys' network, males' attitudes towards women and sex stereotypes (Ng & Pine, 2003). In South Korea, typical female traits of being kind, helpful, sympathetic and caring about others were not valued for executive roles as much as male personality characteristics such as aggressive, forceful, independent and decisive (Kang & Rowley 2006). The influence of social values was evident in the case of Taiwanese female managers who lowered their career aspirations and accepted that they could achieve only a low level of career ambition, given the cultural expectation that they put their family first (Chou, Fosh & Foster, 2006).

Similar to other Confucian societies, female respondents in Singapore accepted the existence of a 'glass ceiling' and its relationship to work-family conflict, networks and family support. Above all, work-family conflict was perceived as the most important barrier. Looking after their children and their aging parents was perceived as their burden. Placing their parents in nursing homes and their children in day-care centres presented not only a financial burden, but also engendered a strong sense of guilt and anxiety, since such arrangements generally conflicted with traditional Asian cultural expectations of filial piety (Li & Leung, 2001).

In Thailand, societal factors that were perceived to be impediments to career progress were those relating to traditional values, religious beliefs and social attitudes toward women, including gender role stereotyping (Yukongdi, 2009). For instance, if a family had limited financial resources and had to make a choice between which of their children should receive the best educational opportunities then, generally, it would be the son who would be given priority (Davidson n.d., p. 17). Furthermore, the influence of Buddhism, the official religion, is pervasive in Thai society (Browell, 2000). Buddhism emphasizes generosity, morality, patience, courage, meditation, wisdom, virtue, energy, truthfulness, resolution, kindness and an even temper. Such values, often regarded as positive, are reflected in a relatively feminine, non-confrontational, caring and gentle kind of leadership that is argued to be unsuitable for promotion to management level (see Fagenson, 1990).

4. METHODOLOGY

A group of Thai female executives occupying positions of president, chief executive officer, general manager, country manager and business director participated in the study. An initial list of potential participants was generated from a variety of sources,

including leading business magazines, and newspapers. To produce a further list of potential participants, a snowball sampling technique was employed. Participants were invited to take part in the study by email or personal letter.

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the participants. The interviews lasted up to two and a half hours and took place at the female executives' office. The female executives were asked to identify the barriers to their career advancement.

5. SAMPLE

A total of 30 female executives participated in the study. The women were chief executive officers, presidents, country managers, managing directors and general managers. Their ages ranged from 35 to 63 years with a mean age of 45. Nineteen of the participants in the sample were married and only one participant was divorced while 10 women were single. Twenty-five female executives graduated with a master's degree, four held a bachelor's degree, while one woman had a doctorate degree. Over half of the women in the study worked in the international private sector while the remaining worked in the local private and public sectors.

6. RESULTS

The female executives were asked to describe the factors that they perceived to be obstacles impeding their career advancement. Based on the interviews, the women executives identified a number of barriers that could be categorized as individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal factors according to the framework for the current study.

At the individual level, the factors mentioned most frequently by the female executives as creating a barrier to career success were related to the personality traits of being emotional and sensitive, to which some attributed to their own feminine personality. The second most frequently cited reason blocking the women's career progress were family variables, such as a lack of understanding from family members (i.e., parents, husbands, children), requests from family members to cease working. Further, some women reported feeling concerned by the lack of understanding shown by their family towards their work. The third most mentioned reason was related to women's own lack of self-motivation for career advancement and work-life balance issues.

Interpersonal factors that were reported as obstructing their career path included the relationship with team members and the old boys' network. Half of the respondents revealed difficulties in working with their immediate supervisors, who had a direct impact on their career advancement. Specifically, a lack of support and recognition from their bosses led to the decision to resign. Apart from an individual's direct supervisor, colleagues and subordinates were evaluated as sources of barriers as well. The female executives explained that they could not focus on work because they would spend so much time trying to manage difficult team members. Another cited barrier

was related to the old boys' network. There were many male senior executives at the top organizational level so there was a tendency for them to prefer men to women. In addition, the female executives felt that men communicated with each other better and they were interested in familiar or common activities. Hence, they were not comfortable dealing with women.

At the organizational level, the most significant issues relating to the glass ceiling were company culture which condoned gender bias, as well as the structure or nature of work which did not support a woman performing certain jobs, and organizational policies and practices which did not support women's career aspirations. Some female executives reported that they failed to reach the top position at the organization because men hardly accepted a woman as their boss. Furthermore, recruitment and promotional practices in some organizations did not provide equal opportunity. Some organizations preferred not to hire women who would be questioned if they had children or were married during the job interview, a reflection of gender bias and discrimination. Other women cited the requirements of the job, such as extensive travelling or having to work as an expatriate in another country as deterrents to advancing their careers.

Only one issue at the societal level was mentioned as creating an invisible barrier for women. A small number of the female executives reported problems relating to societal perception that women were inferior to men. Nonetheless, some of the female executives considered being a woman neither a disadvantage nor an advantage.

When the female executives were asked if Thai legislation and regulations had any impact on career opportunities for women, nearly all of them admitted that they did not know employment legislation and regulations in detail. Most women were familiar only with basic legal requirements on maternity leave. However, the women in the study were of the view that legislation should have neither a positive nor negative impact on women's career advancement.

While a number of other factors were perceived to be barriers, they were cited by fewer women, but were nevertheless important issues. Poor health was considered a hindrance to reaching higher positions in an organization for some female executives. The personality trait of being humble, while admirable in Thai culture, was viewed unfavorably by foreign colleagues in international firms. Being "Thai" was associated with a lack of assertiveness, being "insufficiently aggressive", being too nice, characteristics that were viewed rather negatively by executives from other countries. A lack of fluency in the English language and an organizational culture that emphasized seniority were limiting factors to career growth. In a culture that holds values of respect for elders, being relatively younger than one's peers, for one female executive, meant that she could not get promoted to the position of general manager even if she was ready, but was told by management to wait for fear that her colleagues would not accept a younger person to be their supervisor.

7. DISCUSSION

The barriers to career advancement for Thai female executives were perceived to be created by a number of different factors. The key findings indicated that career barriers included individual factors such as being too emotional and overly sensitive, issues

relating to work-family balance and a lack of career aspiration; interpersonal factors such as difficult working relationships and the old boys' network; organizational factors such as an inhospitable culture of gender bias, discriminatory human resources policies and practices, as well as the requirements of the work itself; and societal factor such as gender misconception.

At the individual level, the findings in the present study relating to the perceived barriers are somewhat reflective of research findings in the mainstream literature. Critical at senior management level are maturity and emotional stability, because of the high tension and various stimuli associated with roles at higher management levels (Boudreau et al., 2001; Rodsutti & Swierczek, 2002;). In various countries, the available evidence confirms that managerial women experienced more stress than men due to the minority status of managerial and executive women in most organizations. Stress is also caused by the expectations placed upon them with their dual role as working woman and homemaker (Nelson & Burke, 2000). Hence, a lack of emotional stability can pose as an impediment to career growth.

Consistent with prior research, a lack of career aspiration is considered as one of the most difficult to overcome of the 'glass ceiling' that women create themselves (Nelson & Burke 2000, p. 109). In the current study, lacking career aspiration and self-motivation mainly arise from difficulty in balancing work-family issues. The female executives accept that they are generally expected to look after or take care of not only their husband and children but also their parents-in-law. Women may feel guilty if they do not perform their household and care giving role at the expected level and quality due to their deeply-held, often subconscious, beliefs relating to social role expectations for women (Cooke, 2006).

With regard to interpersonal factors as barriers, a lack of support and recognition from a direct supervisor, most of whom are men, had a key influence on the female executives' decision to resign. Women are required to develop managerial styles that are neither masculine nor feminine, but are acceptable to male supervisors, colleagues and subordinates (Ragins et al., 1998). Such managerial style contradicts what is considered to be acceptable behaviors for women, for example being told to take risks but be successful, be aggressive but easy to get along with, and be ambitious but do not expect equal treatment (Jain & Mukherji, 2010; Nelson & Burke, 2000). This might be a possible reason why the women executives in the study maintain their relationships in the workplace by applying non-confrontational and feminine styles, even though they are self-driven, aggressive, self-confident and decisive. The findings in this study are consistent with Southern Asian leadership dimensions that value a charismatic leadership style in terms of being team-oriented, humane-oriented (House et al., 2004) and being high on femininity (Hofstede, 1980).

Another interpersonal barrier is an old boys' network or informal men's group. Thai women in this study were isolated from male-dominated networking systems, thereby preventing women in senior management from gaining access to personal and professional support for their career opportunities, for example through a mentoring programme (Anderson, 2005; Nelson & Burke, 2000). A possible explanation is that women's under-representation in leadership positions may be a barrier for women to be

a part of male networks therefore, women are perceived as having less influence and are promoted less than male colleagues (Metz, 2009).

At the organizational level, key barriers in this area include gender bias embedded in corporate culture, discriminatory human resource policies and practices, and types of work which are perceived to be less women-friendly. Corporate culture that condones gender stereotyping hinders women's move to top positions. Sex stereotyping creates various forms of bias, such as in recruitment and selection, offering less critical assignments to women, unequal development opportunities, and in performance appraisal criteria and processes (Budhwar et al., 2006; Nelson & Burke, 2000; Ng & Pine, 2003; Wood, 2008). Some female executives in this study report that they experience less chance for selection and promotion because of the simple reason that they are women. Thailand is a high power distance culture (Hofstede, 1980) and is low on gender egalitarianism (House et al., 2004), which means inequality acceptance among Thais could be a source of gender stereotyping. A number of studies have suggested that gender stereotyping may be reduced if women have the chance to work with or be mentored by female senior management because women learn and experience from role models, while at the same time they can deliver business results in the eyes of a female executive group (Anderson, 2005). However, some researchers have argued that the number of women in management positions is not sufficient for such mentoring programme to be feasible (Jain & Mukherji, 2010; Nelson & Burke, 2000). Finally, certain organizational policies such as those requiring female executives to relocate and gain international experience are included in women's career advancement strategies for today's global business (Ragins et al., 1998). In this study, work which requires travelling or relocating outside of Thailand is found to be a contributing factor for some women's resignation because of family responsibilities.

At the societal level, the female executives mentioned that gender misconception is an invisible barrier for women. In general, gender stereotype relates to the perception that women are inferior to men, it has been argued, due to their lack of masculine traits (Lyness & Thomson, 1997; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989) and women are expected to perform the multiple roles of career woman, daughter, wife and mother (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Lyness & Thomson, 1997). Women are expected to be humble, respectful, attentive, understanding and discreet (van der Boon, 2003). These are feminine or transformational characteristics – in contrast to masculine or transactional styles. Gender misconception results in the view that women are not effective leaders because of their lack of masculine leadership qualities (Jain & Mukherji, 2010, King et al., 2009). Such gender misconception can result in human resource policies and practices, including recruitment, promotion and development to be biased against women. This could lead to a shortage of competent women in business and society.

Finally, while there may not be specific anti-discrimination legislation similar to those found in some countries¹, in Thailand there are some provisions stipulated in the Labor Protection Act BE 2541 (1998) prohibiting discrimination in employment based on gender (Baker & McKenzie, 2009). The evidence from the current study suggests that a lack of familiarity with laws and regulations might, to some extent, explain why the

¹ For example, in Australia, anti-discrimination legislation such as Age Discrimination Act 2004, Disability Discrimination Act 1992, Racial Discrimination Act 1975, Sex Discrimination Act 1984.

female executives do not perceive laws and regulations to have any consequential effect on their career advancement.

8. CONCLUSION

Many Asian countries reveal consistent results when it comes to women's career advancement. Success mainly relates to the individual level of personality traits and family support as well as the interpersonal level of building relationships among team members and networking. The major barriers for female professionals climbing the corporate ladder are those at the organizational and societal levels. The main obstacle for Asian women relates to gender stereotyping. Organizational factors that impede or block women's career progress are tokenism, the old-boys' network, as well as discriminatory recruitment and promotional practices which are perceived to create serious invisible barriers for women. Meanwhile, the existence of women's dual role as career women and mother puts additional pressure and responsibilities on women in Asian societies.

The implications for women who aspire to the top position of organizations are that they should be proactive and take responsibility for managing their own career. Women should be aware of and understand the visible and invisible barriers, or 'glass ceiling', in relation to their career advancement. Even if they are in executive positions, the women in this study have accepted that they still face obstacles from all four levels: individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal. Thus, it is important for women to set clear career goals and have strategies in place to keep them at the forefront in their respective organizations. As noted, there are also barriers that need to be tackled at the organizational and societal levels which will require the involvement of decision-makers in organizations, policy-makers and legislators at the governmental level and changes in attitudes at the societal level.

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