

Title: Women's career progression to senior managerial level in Bangladeshi banking sector: influence of family and society

Summary

Social scientists have been conducting research to explore the reasons behind women underrepresentation in managerial roles in western economies and they have found gender stereotype as a key factor. However, the influence and prevalence of gender stereotyping, its impact on organisational outcome and its intersection with social elements such as influence of family and society are yet to be explored in the patriarchal societies of South-East Asia (SEA), for example, Bangladesh, which aims to graduate as a developing nation in 2024, via improvement against the UN's sustainable development goals (SDGs). Hence, adopting Eagly and Karau's role congruity theory, this research will explore the range of stereotypes and prejudice about women and how these hinder women's career progression to senior managerial roles. Interviewing 35 current and former banking employees, this research found factors such as lack of family support and family commitments as factors impacting women's career progression.

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Word count: 2000 words

Body of the paper

Globally, women are positioned in nearly one-third of managerial roles (WEF, 2021). In the European Union, women account for half of all employed, but only one out of three managers (36.9 per cent) are women (Catalyst, 2020). Similarly, almost half (47 per cent) of the labour force in the USA is female, yet they consist of only 40 per cent of managers (ibid). Almost 65 per cent of the companies operating in the Asia Pacific region have less than 35 per cent of women representation in the senior managerial level, while around 26 per cent of the companies have no women on their boards (ILO, 2015). In Bangladesh, for example, female labour force participation increased from 27 per cent to 36 per cent in the last 20 years (ibid). Still, women comprise 11 per cent of managerial roles, far lower than western countries, which raises concerns about their career path as managers.

Risman (2018, 2017, 2004) theorise gender as an inequality system that takes place in three dimensions; individual, interaction, and macro-level of the society. The structure is the social construction and within which culture operates at the different levels. It shapes individual choice and social interactions. Risman (2018, 2017) differentiated between cultural and material aspects of each level of gender structure. She argued culture as an ideological process, with meanings given to bodies and norms for social interaction and widely shared ideologies, while material conditions include our bodies and the legal rules that distribute physical rewards and constraints in any given historical moment. Risman's interactional level dimension focuses more on the cultural stereotypes, discussing how bias and expectations shape the way women and men interact with one another so that we instantly perceive men as more competent than women in different aspects (Fisk and Ridgeway, 2018; Chavez and Wingfield, 2018).

There has been extensive research in exploring the factors which limit women from reaching leadership roles. Several researchers observed that women's progression to managerial roles is affected by individual factors, e.g., family vs work goals (Diekman et al., 2017), a mismatch between women's preferences and managerial job attributes (Cortes and Pan, 2018), and structural factors as patriarchal attitudes (Carbajal, 2018). These factors create a gendered division of labour, influencing stereotyped social beliefs and congruous behaviours on gendered roles and traits.

Gender stereotypes amplify further in predominantly patriarchal societies. Patriarchy is a social system where men dominate and exploit women and hold control over the property (Walby, 1990). Patriarchal culture is ingrained in different spheres of society. The patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position in families and workplace. Cultural tradition dictates interpersonal relationship and interaction between men and women and enforced male domination into the social structure. It justifies women marginalisation in all education, labour market, economy, business, politics, family and inheritance Furthermore, it hinders women's road to leadership by defining work roles as gendered (Broadbridge, 2008), favouring men over women (Sidani et al., 2015) etc. Thus, it contributes to gender stereotypes in society (Crittenden and Wright, 2013) and affects women's career progression.

In the last two decades, discrimination against women arose as one of the most visible social concerns in Bangladesh, which generated women subordination. Like other patriarchal societies, women subordination and male domination are the fundamental tenets of Bangladeshi social structure (Sultana, 2010). In the last two decades, discrimination against women in different aspects arose as one of Bangladesh's most visible social concerns. In Bangladesh, patriarchal ideology is well-ingrained and governs practices and behaviours in society. It also undermines women's position and contribution in different spheres of life, especially at home and the workplace (Kabeer, 2008; Raihan, 2018).

Despite lesser visibility of patriarchal structures, empirical evidence from the western industrialised countries show that women face gendered behaviour, norms and practices at workplaces, affecting their career progression (Pelales and Bouma, 2019; Male et al., 2018). So, exploring the prevalence, nature and impact of gender stereotypes in women's career progression to leadership in a society where patriarchal issues are less 'hidden' will be of immense empirical value and will contribute developing theory around gender regimes in highly skilled and educated service sector in emerging economies, making Bangladesh an ideal site for this research. Theoretically, this research will extend the role congruity theory in the context of SEA, by critically discussing the importance of family and society in shaping women's role in the society and subsequently impacting their workplace contribution and organisational outcome.

More specifically, the research will focus on the Bangladeshi banking sector, one of the largest economic contributors and service sector employers with 29,000 females (Bangladesh Bank, 2021; Kim and Wood, 2020). In Bangladesh, banks are primarily divided into two categories, state-owned public banks and private commercial banks. Overall, throughout the sector, women occupy 16 per cent of the entry-level positions, 15 per cent of the middle management and 9 per cent of the top management positions (Bangladesh Bank, 2021). This picture of women underrepresentation varies between different banks, depending on the ownership structure. Yet, these figures are far below the international average and UN SDG 2030 requirement. Despite Central Bank's pledge and regular gender equality training to achieve UNSDG 2030 Target 5, data presented above show a clear picture of women's underrepresentation and barriers to reaching senior managerial roles.

To explore stereotypes and prejudices prevailing in the Bangladeshi Banking sector, this research will adopt Eagly and Karau's role congruity theory (RCT) to explore the stereotypes and prejudices (Eagly and Karau, 2002). According to this theory, there is a congruity between the men's social role and the leader's role, whereas more incongruity exists when considering women taking charge of the leadership role. It suggests the prejudice and stereotype about women in the position of a leader arises as there are inconsistencies amid the leader's role and women's role. Thus, women are dealt with less positive attitude (Vial et al., 2016) and they face incongruity at the time of choosing them as a leader over other male colleagues (Koenig et al., 2011). The reason behind this incongruity is people associate the characteristics required for leadership with that of masculinity (for example, dominance, rationality, assertiveness etc.) Such role incongruity may put women in a disadvantageous situation in a traditionally male intensive office or industry.

RCT has been widely used in investigating and understanding prejudice against female leaders. In performance evaluations, the performance of women was more scrutinised than men, like the 'Think manager, think male' phenomenon (Glass and Cook, 2016; Schein, 2007; Wilson, 2002). Findings were also similar in SEA societies, although there is a general

dearth of research here, with women disadvantaged through performance expectations and stereotypes (Mukarram et al., 2018).

Scholars have long noted the challenges women face managing family responsibilities in the face of competing obligations from demanding workplaces (e.g., Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977). A central issue contributing to this situation is the ideal worker norm, which entails that most valuable and committed workers can work longer hours and whose family responsibilities are invisible at work (Wynn 2018; Williams 2000; Davies and Frink 2014). Proponents of this norm assume that full-time workers either do not have any responsibilities outside their work or they have someone to look after such responsibilities (Williams 2000). As a result, ideal workers are able to focus entirely on their professional tasks and meet the needs of the employer since they are not distracted by outside responsibilities (Davies and Frink 2014). Employees that exemplify the ideal are more likely to get hired and advance. Due to this, the ideal worker norm has real-world implications for how companies distribute opportunities and rewards.

Methodology

This research adopted case study method. Data was collected through semi-structured interview. In this research purposive sampling and snowball technique were used. Number of participants were 35 and they include male and female, officers (designation below manager) and managers working and previously worked in the Bangladeshi Banking sector. In this research purposive sampling and snowball technique were used. As the researcher previously worked for Bangladeshi Banking sector in the managerial role, he used his judgements to reach out initial prospective participants from his professional contacts. This has been done to find out participants who can answer the research questions and meet research objectives in the best possible manner. From those participants out of professional contacts, snowball sampling was used to reach out to other participants. This purposive sampling added an additional layer of trust and dependability for the participants, especially for women employees, in a country where there is high power distance and lack of governance, trust, job security prevail in the society.

Findings:

Women working in the banks have reported their immense workload in the family and lack of family support. They do not get sufficient support from their family members and manage the house full time, beside their regular office job. This has become stressful, and tiresome, impacting their productivity

“My morning starts in a very different way. No matter if I am sick or unwell, I have to get up early in the morning, get my son ready for the school, feed him breakfast and drop him to school. My son is also comfortable with me. Sometimes, my father-in-law or any other from family drop him. But, my husband never drops him..... Throughout the day, despite my severe work pressure, I have to call several times at home to know what’s going on, whether everything is done as per my given instruction, what is my son doing! Besides office, I need to manage home.”

However, lack of family support is not the only issue which hinders women’s career progression. They are also pressurised from home to leave the job after marriage.

Let me tell you what hindered me after my son was born and I got it from females. First thing I heard in my family is to leave my job. One of my aunts..... very close aunts advised me this. They told me, "you have got your child after so much struggle (first miscarriage and then second pregnancy – son), so can you not leave your job for your child ?"

As the children grew up, women's circumstances change in both home and office. Being in a male dominated patriarchal society, it is difficult to let male colleagues understand what a mother is facing at home. A mother can find difficulty due to lack of family support, resulting her to reach office late. A male manager does not try to understand her problem, rather, do harsh behaviour, which, according to participant may result in poor performance rating if the office timing is not fixed.

Being an infant, he doesn't want to stay with new people. He used to cry a lot. So, my mother-in-law said that time that I have to feed my child his breakfast and then go to office..... I reached office at 10:30 am or sometimes 10:45 am instead of 10 am. At one point, my line manager became harsh.I could not tell my manager directly about what problem I was facing. I didn't tell him at first. I had to fix my timing. Otherwise, my performance rating would have been affected.

One male manager has shared importance of social class in the banking career.

"You see your background basically defines your connections. For us, we work with high-net-worth clients. So for that maybe we need access to different country clubs where we actually find these clients. You need to be of certain level (of background) I See where we work, we only work on personalized banking. We have a handful of clients that we work with. We don't work with every Tom, Dick and Harry. So, to get selected for the personalized banking team is a whole rigorous process in itself as well. You have to go through a lot of screening. They see your (family) background, they see your education background, they see your presentation skills and then they see your business qualities and only then they would place you here."

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