

Managing Gender Diversity in Asia: A Research Companion

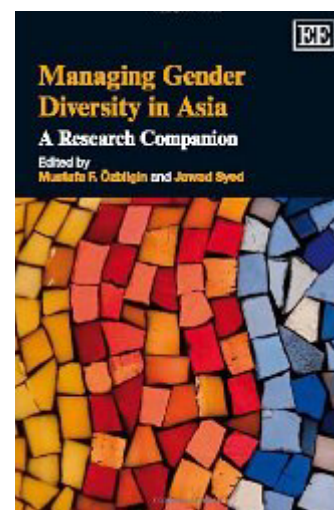
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This book is, as its subtitle declares, very much “a research companion.” It covers and concatenates results of gender research that pertain to the Asian world in a piecemeal but convenient fashion according to the interests and work of the authors of each chapter. The introductory chapter presents the contents and focus of the chapters that follow without interpretation, letting each study speak for itself. The twenty-two authors, while of more diverse backgrounds, are, with three exceptions operating out of Anglo-Saxon university and research frameworks in Australia, UK, and North America.



It is evident from the start that studies of gender issues both in the workplace and domestically are situated in complex contexts that include the political and legal construction of the state or region, the societal history and prevailing economy and ongoing norms affecting women’s position and roles both at home and at work. In many cases religious frameworks define or can be interpreted and used to determine how women should be and act. Progress, if it be termed as such, needs to take place on all of these fronts for change to occur. Haya Al-Dajani’s look at “Diversity and inequality among women in employment in the Arab Middle East region” points this out, as well as highlighting the difficulty of lumping the socio-economic diversity of a region into a single treatment. One can simply list differences and challenges as the author nicely does and beg for closer research in neglected areas.

Faiza Ali’s “A comparative study of EEO in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh” indicates a lagging but rising economic participation of women in this region. Here the focus is on the educational opportunities or lack thereof that prevent greater involvement on the part of women. The author has created handy listings of the international instruments ratified by each of these countries as well as indicating the legal, judicial and informational institutions addressing EEO in each of the countries and has, as well, indicated the main similarities and differences between them. One wonders, of course, at this moment when such disastrous flooding and relocation of the Pakistani populace is underway, will this regressively affect EEO or perhaps open the door to change.

Norsiah Aminudin’s study of Malaysia in Chapter 4 focuses on employee involvement (EI) across gender lines. The Malaysian situation is driven by its “Vision 2020” whose goal is to bring the nation to “developed” status by that date, and while women tend to inhabit the lower level jobs they are present in quality circles and ownership schemes influencing organizational directions. Women’s attitudes toward EI and organizational commitment differ in form from those of men, but research has provided conflicting causes for this as well as showing that gender differences, particularly in regard to commitment here are least pronounced than stereotypical interpretations would suggest.

Chapter 5 is a brief research report by Syed Saad Andaleeb about gender integration issues in the Bangladeshi workplace. The key issue is unpreparedness on the part of organizations and leadership to cope with the swiftly growing numbers of women in the workplace. This, it is noted is a worldwide phenomenon but the focus of this research is specifically on women’s participation in decision making. The

author then describes the results of interview research on key factors, organizational and familial culture, the main finding being the correlation between ease of communication and the sense of participation.

A trio of authors next explores “Gender differences in work experiences, satisfaction and well-being among manufacturing managers in Turkey” in Chapter 6. This is an interesting new area of exploration in a country where East meets West. Inevitably it means conflict and synthesis between values systems. A large scale study was conducted in manufacturing concerns in 16 Turkish towns. Its results seemed to confirm previous studies in this regard noting that the demographics of male and female workers showed attitudes consistent with the lower age and status of women, while work satisfaction and well being were relatively similar across the gender divide. The authors conclude with implications drawn from the study about ways to support the career aspirations of women on the job as well as indicating where women needed to work at creating social capital. Finally, families must be encouraged to support women’s educational advancement.

Chapter 7 looks at what Japanese EEO law implies for diversity management, or what the lack of hard legislation—perhaps a cultural propensity for conflict avoid and at play here—has allowed to not happen. The comment of a Japanese lawyer sums it up, “they asked us if we wanted equality or protection. We said we wanted equality, so they removed all protection and did not provide equality.” The chapter reviews roughly 20 years of Japanese EEO legal progression. Initial equality legislation (1985) had little or no impact and work-around strategies frustrated change. Amendments in 1997 removed labor protections but advantages to women were hampered by unequal shares of domestic responsibilities. The latest laws pay attention to sexual harassment and provide a somewhat faulted childcare leave. They outlawed dual track promotion systems and mandated access to mediation in disputes. However enforcement provided nothing in the way of penalties other than a “name and shame” process for recalcitrant offenders. The authors essentially conclude with a plea for research that can support needed effective legislation, enforcement and appropriate penalties.

Lebanon is the focus of Chapter 8, here the issue being “rhetoric vs. reality.” There is significant popularization of diversity management talk in Lebanon, but the authors see this largely as a veneer, not a solid reality. While the situation of women in Lebanon has been described quite different from that in surrounding countries, statistical studies of women’s economic activities and public sphere participation is not all that different. The research reported confirms that the rhetoric has not resulted in well defined targets and that the much talked about business case for diversity is in fact flaccid and women’s issues are avoided rather than addressed.

Chapter 9 returns to the Islamic Middle East for a look at feminism and women’s situation from the perspective of development. Women’s role according to the authors is based on Islamic patriarchal structure projected into the larger society and hence the workplace. Much of the chapter, nonetheless, documents women’s progress, public and political, in transnational enterprises as well as in entrepreneurship and the NGO sector in this region. It is strongly suggested that the influence of Western models of diversity and it is also implied that globalization in this case has had a salutary effect on women’s empowerment. This chapter along with Chapters 2 and 12 might be read well in conjunction as the last of these addresses the gender gap in Muslim majority countries (MMCs). There is the tension between Islam itself and the great diversity of ethnic, social, economic and political contexts found in MMCs. The key to comprehending the Islamic situation is in understanding that it supports qualitative equality, not quantitative as is the focus in universalistic West. This means that there is a high focus on the diversity that exists between women and men in both their biological and social roles. This form of diversity seems

largely overlooked or even suppressed in much common equality-focused diversity practice. As this point the reader is tempted to ask whether, even in touting women's equality, we are not engaged in a vicious cycle of colonization that masks and profits from rather than addresses exploitation in the undertow of the capitalist economy. The authors do not go this far, but they clearly underline the diversity contribution of women in traditional societies as both real and unrecognized.

Chapter 10 focuses on "Gender and equality of opportunity" in China. Here in urban situations official policy and opportunity have walked successfully hand in hand. However, the tendency to look at Han ethnicity as undifferentiated may prevent effective scrutiny of what may be better dealt with by a strategy of "divide and understand." This is a direction in which the author, Jane Nolan moves this study. Nolan looks briefly at the development of women's roles in the ideology and practice of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in contrast with the deep seated Confucian and traditional perspectives. Attention is paid to the shifting policy in the post-Mao reform era with its opening to the West and economic drive. One sees a familiar pattern in the risks and limited opportunity for women found in employer owned and managed enterprises where desire to avoid maternity and retirement costs lead to preference for part time employment. Educational opportunity, while higher for many than it was in the past, still has a long way to go as do the curricula toward which women are steered. Progress is being made though even in rural area through microfinance and other projects. China's central control and policies of gradualism have seemingly caused less hardship than neo-liberal shock therapy of rapid market and political transformation in other post-communist countries.

Chapter 11 looks at women as managers in a context where rapid development has necessitated an increase in managerial numbers and skills. It raises the question of how diversity is managed, whether by equal opportunity or managed diversity approaches, raising the question of to what degree differences and particularly gender differences are ignored or focused upon as resources. There is conflicting evidence as to whether the latter approach has matured to the degree that it can provide conclusive evidence of success. As the authors search for explanations for the underemployment and underutilization of women and examine suspected factors, there seems to be nothing new in the generalization of causes whether speaking of Asia or the West. They dedicate an overview paragraph describing the situation in nine Asian economies and do an analysis of factors promoting success for women. Much is a matter of a woman's individual craft while the majority of situations seem dependent on the interface between social attitudes and the pressures of legislation.

Chapter 13 is a case study of women's situation at the white collar level in a male dominated industry, steel works in Vietnam. There is an overview of the history of women's rights and legislation in the country and the recent decline in socialist state support. The authors do a good overview of the issues and it is not to fault their work to say that there is little that is new here in the reports regarding promotion, success, male dominance, retirement and competition between women's domestic and workplace demands. While the legal framework for equality exists here as in many other places, it is the matter of implementation where it is stymied.

The book ends with a rather intriguing look at a relatively unexamined diversity topic, "State Management of the sex industry in China's past and present." It raises the question of how China has differed from the abolitionist and regulatory efforts elsewhere. It is a fascinating history probably because one reads few such from other places. Here in classical times imperial and state run brothels were a normal part of the entertainment system and were provisioned to the military. More puritanical attitudes entered under the Mongol conquest. The Ming Dynasty lowered the status of the sex industry and led to its eventual

privatization beginning in the 18th century, though the state in fact benefited from its taxation. In the Republican era it was clearly stigmatized as social evil and finally fully suppressed in the Mao era and reeducation of sex workers took place. Today this continues with less heavy handed management of social culture with anti-prostitution and anti-pornography agenda now focused on the karaoke bars. Whatever the state's position, the gender issue of significance in all this, was the oppression involved in sourcing of women for the sex trade. They came as captives, via migration to cities or chattel sold by impoverished families, or self imposed as a chosen profession that would help make ends meet.

This reader set down the book feeling much better informed about other parts of the world, but not significantly enlightened about gender diversity. One has the sense that diversity and gender studies are locked into a set of categorizations of situations and behavior that one would hope would be more effectively broken into and put into perspective by the study of these diverse cultures in their home settings. Maybe the research projects themselves are shaped by globalization thinking as are enterprises. With the exception of the relatively open minded discussion of Islamic perspectives, there is nothing to either break with the same old diversity/gender story. This is the larger question that requires a new perspective. I suspect that this is partly due to the lopsided nature of gender studies where the examination of the impact of male roles on men lies somewhere on the dark side of the moon.

While well referenced and indexed, a book of this nature would also benefit from a glossary of acronyms and abbreviations. These are on one hand a benefit to reading and economy of text, but can be confusing where they are not labeled at the outset.