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Gender disparity in job satisfaction of Western versus Asian managers

Anusorn Singhapakdi ^{a,*}, M. Joseph Sirgy ^b, Dong-Jin Lee ^c, Kalayanee Senasu ^d,
Grace B. Yu ^e, Amiee Mellon Nisius ^f

^a College of Business & Public Administration, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529-0220, USA

^b Virginia Tech, USA

^c Yonsei University, South Korea

^d School of Human Resource Development, National Institute of Development Administration, Thailand

^e Hannam University, South Korea

^f College of Business & Public Administration, Old Dominion University, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study is to shed more light on gender disparity in job satisfaction in the context of Western versus Asian managers. It addresses the “gender paradox of the female contented worker” and takes a position that the paradox does not apply to female managers in Asia. Data were collected from Thailand as representative of Asian countries and from the U.S. as representative of Western countries. The data show that the gender paradox phenomenon is suspect at best. The results suggest that there is gender disparity in job satisfaction in both countries. There are also significant gender disparities in lower-order quality of work life (QWL) and organizational socialization in Thailand, but not in the U.S. There is no significant gender disparity in higher-order QWL in both countries. These results imply that gender disparity in job satisfaction in Thailand is driven mainly by significant gender disparity in lower-order QWL and organizational socialization.

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1. Introduction

Job satisfaction has been an important research topic for many years (Clark, 1997; Donohue & Heywood, 2004; Sloane & Williams, 2000). Job satisfaction is closely related to income, working conditions, effort requirements, chance for promotions, self-actualization potential and more (Bender, Donohue, & Heywood, 2005; Clark & Oswald, 1996). Studies have generally revealed that female workers tend to experience substantial disadvantages in the workplace compared to their male counterpart. Women are still over-represented in lower-paying jobs (Banyard, 2010; Bradley, 2007), while only 3% of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are female (Catalyst, 2010). Female workers experience:

- lower pay (Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2004; England, 2010),
- gender bias in hiring and evaluation (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Ridgeway, 1997),
- limited training opportunities (Lynch, 1992), and
- disadvantages in pension and other benefits (Heywood, 1989).

Despite the fact that women earn less and enjoy substantially less autonomy and status in the workplace than men, research has shown

that women tend to express higher levels of work satisfaction than men. This has come to be known as the *paradox of the female contented worker* (Agassi, 1982; Clark, 1997; Crosby, 1982; Donohue & Heywood, 2004; Hodson, 1989; Phelan, 1994). One possible reason for this paradox is difference in preferences and weights that women and men place on their jobs (Clark, 1997; Hakim, 1996; Sloane & Williams, 2000). Studies have found that while male workers prefer jobs with high income, responsibility, and opportunities for leadership; female workers prefer jobs with good co-workers, good supervisors, and the opportunity to help others (Konrad, Corrigan, Lieb, & Ritchie, 2000). These job preference differences result from gender socialization (Perlman & Pike, 1994) and a desire to integrate work and family life (Garey, 1999). Women have stronger desire to integrate work and family (Garey, 1999); therefore, they are more likely to choose to work part-time (Epstein et al., 1999; Glauber, 2012).

The research reported in this paper focuses on cross-cultural gender disparity in relation to job satisfaction, organizational socialization, and quality-of-work life. The authors argue that, in addition to its direct effect, gender can affect job satisfaction by means of organizational socialization and quality of work life. These constructs are important because of their organizational outcome effects, as well as their pronounced managerial implications. Culture is also an important construct in this study (by using survey data of managers from Thailand and the U.S.) because much of the research dealing with the paradox of the female contented worker has been conducted in developed countries or Western countries (Koonmee, Singhapakdi, Virakul, & Lee, 2010). Based on a literature review, no studies were identified that

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 757 683 5129; fax: +1 757 683 3258.

E-mail addresses: asinghap@odu.edu (A. Singhapakdi), sirgy@vt.edu (M.J. Sirgy), djlee@base.yonsei.ac.kr (D.-J. Lee), kalaya.k@nida.ac.th (K. Senasu), b.yu@skku.edu (G.B. Yu), amellon@odu.edu (A.M. Nisius).

compare Western managers with Asian managers. Therefore, this study is designed to contribute to the extant literature given that the U.S. is representative of the developed and Western countries, whereas Thailand is considered to be representative of developing and non-Western countries. Moreover, as noted by Marta and Singhapakdi (2005), the two countries are also different in terms of cultural values. Based on Hofstede's (1980) cultural typology, they concluded by making the following assertion:

Thais are more collectivist than Americans and more accepting of enduring power differentials. Thailand is a more feminine culture, which means they tend to prefer more nurturing over aggressive behavior, and they also strive harder to avoid situations of uncertainty (Marta & Singhapakdi, 2005; p. 564).

The feminist movement in the U.S. in the last few decades has helped bring about gender reforms in the U.S. such as greater access to education, more equitable pay, and a reduction of domestic violence. Concerning equality in the workplace, it is probably true that women now have pay that is more equitable with men (Banyard, 2010; Bradley, 2007). However, it is important to discern if they, also, have achieved more equality in the workplace in terms of work–life quality, organizational socialization, and job satisfaction. Given the extensive globalization in the recent decades, it is also important to determine if this workplace liberalization has taken place in developing and non-Western countries such as Thailand. The findings from this research are important because they may highlight the need for both private and public sectors to develop specific policies to address gender-disparity issues in the workplace, especially in the developing and non-Western countries.

As previously mentioned, the focus of the present study is on job satisfaction, organizational socialization, and quality-of-work life (QWL) because of their organizational outcome effects and their pronounced managerial implications. These work-related factors (organizational performance, organizational commitment, work–life balance, and life satisfaction) are vitally important for the health of both the employer and the employee. QWL and job satisfaction are factors that affect employee well-being; and developing policies and programs designed to enhance QWL and job satisfaction is essentially an ethical imperative in today's business (Cascio, 1998). It is important to note that QWL is different from job satisfaction. According to previous research, QWL is an antecedent of job satisfaction (e.g., Koonmee et al., 2010; Lee, Singhapakdi, & Sirgy, 2007). Ultimately, employee socialization affects job satisfaction; thus, policies and programs designed to enhance employee socialization should enhance organizational health through increased job satisfaction (Singhapakdi, Sirgy, & Lee, 2010; Van Maanen, 1976).

While more women are in management roles in today's organizations, misleading assumptions regarding women in leadership positions have not changed much over the years (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008). As the paradox of the female contented worker is based on research conducted in Western countries, it may not be applicable to Asian countries or Asian female business executives. In addition, past research has focused on women workers in general, as opposed to business executives. The present study, with its focus on the paradox of the female contented worker, uses data from managers from both Western and Asian countries.

2. Conceptual development and hypotheses

One may argue that female managers tend to experience lower levels of job satisfaction than male managers. This may be partly because female managers, compared to their male counterparts, tend to socialize less and experience lower levels of QWL, particularly in relation to low-order needs such as economic needs. The effect of gender on job satisfaction, organizational socialization, and QWL is moderated by culture, specifically Asian versus Western culture. Thus, the hypothesis is that the gender effect on job satisfaction,

organizational socialization, and QWL is more evident in Asian cultures than in Western. The theoretical model capturing these hypotheses is shown in Fig. 1.

2.1. Gender disparity in job satisfaction

Past research has produced much evidence suggesting that women workers, compared to men, experience higher levels of job satisfaction (Agassi, 1982; Clark, 1997; Crosby, 1982; Donohue & Heywood, 2004; Hodson, 1989; Phelan, 1994). However, it is likely that the paradox of the female contented worker does not extend to female business executives. According to the *occupation-specific sex segregation effect* (Hodson, 1989; Wharton & Baron, 1991), female workers are likely to have jobs in stereotypical female occupations (office work). As a result, they are likely to compare their work conditions with other women, thus feeling satisfied with their jobs. Conversely, females who work in male-dominated occupations (management positions) report lower job satisfaction on average than most women, despite of the fact that they benefit from higher pay and job status than those in stereotypical female occupations (Hakim, 1996). In this context, it appears that females in male-dominated occupations tend to compare themselves with their male counterparts, and as such perceive gendered occupation inequality.

Based on this theory and suggestive evidence, the authors test a contrasting hypothesis to the paradox of the female contented worker focusing on female business managers:

H1. There is significant gender disparity in job satisfaction in that male managers experience greater job satisfaction than female managers.

2.2. Gender disparity in quality of work life (QWL)

A more elaborate explanation of the gender effect on job satisfaction is QWL. Past studies show that QWL correlates with job satisfaction—the greater the QWL, the higher the job satisfaction (Anbarasan & Mehta, 2010; Cascio, 1998; Chan & Wyatt, 2007; Koonmee et al., 2010; Schwepker, 2001; Singhapakdi et al., 2010; Sirgy, Efraty, Siegel, & Lee, 2001; Sirgy, Reilly, Wu, & Efraty, 2008; Valentine, 2010). For example, Sirgy et al. (2001) define QWL as employee satisfaction with a variety of needs through resources, activities, and outcomes stemming from participation in the workplace. Furthermore, one can conceptualize QWL in terms of employee satisfaction with two major categories of needs: lower-order needs (basic needs) and higher-order needs (growth needs) (Maslow, 1970). The lower-order need satisfaction of the QWL construct (LQWL) consists of employee satisfaction of health/safety needs and economic/family needs. The higher-order need (HQWL) construct reflects employee satisfaction with social, esteem, self-actualization, knowledge, and esthetic needs (Sirgy et al., 2001; Marta et al., 2011). Both lower-order and higher-order needs can be met through organizational resources (Valentine, Greller, & Richtermey, 2006). These two QWL dimensions contribute to job satisfaction such that the greater the satisfaction of lower- and higher-order needs of employees, the higher the job satisfaction.

Female business executives are likely to have expectations related to LQWL, comparable to male business executives. This may be because they do not compare their pay and working conditions to other female workers in clerical positions, but rather to their male counterparts. As such, their LQWL expectations are likely to be equivalent to men's. However, survey data show that not only do male managers tend to receive higher pay than female managers (e.g., Crosby, 1982; O'Neil et al., 2008), but also have a higher probability of receiving better pensions and health insurance (Heywood, 1989). Further, female managers often suffer a wage penalty for motherhood (e.g., Budig & England, 2001; Budig & Hodges, 2010). Consequently, female managers are likely

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