

## **Gender and leadership in South Asia: dreams and realities**

Global leadership has served as a hallmark topic in leadership research for the past few decades, in response to an unprecedented growth of international firms and markets (Ajarimah, 2001; Caligiuri, 2006; Gentry *et al.*, 2014; Khilji *et al.*, 2010; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2012; Özbilgin and Syed, 2010). However, scholars have described it as a western-centric (Arvey *et al.*, 2015) and male-dominated (Kyriakidou, 2012; Murray and Syed, 2010; Syed and Murray, 2008) field. The intersectional effects of gender, ethnicity and other forms of identity remain relatively underexplored in the leadership literature.

With the purpose of providing an unconventional non-western perspective (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Khilji and Rowley, 2013) and also in line with the intersectionality perspective (Shields, 2008), this special issue (SI) comprises research that explores South Asian leadership experiences and perspectives about gender. An examination of the intersections between gender and leadership, and/or ethnicity and gender in leadership can help us to understand changes in social relations over time. An intersectional lens is also helpful in deconstructing categories within which policy makers and academics often confine groups and individuals. It provides a nuanced and holistic understanding of how women are located within various social situations and contexts (Shields, 2008). For example, in their recent qualitative study of South Asian heritage, Muslim, female leaders and managers in the UK, Tariq and Syed (2017) take into account interconnected and overlapping factors (gender, ethnicity, religion and family status) that affect not only the issues and challenges these women face in the labor market but also the individual agency and strategies they use to overcome any obstacles in the way of their employment and leadership.

Arvey *et al.* (2015) note that western scholars and western data predominantly drive global leadership research. To energize this field and add to theoretical significance (Glynn and Raffaelli, 2010), it is important to examine global leadership and its interplay with gender in non-western or “unconventional” contexts (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Khilji and Rowley, 2013; Scandura and Dorfman, 2004; Steers *et al.*, 2012).

For the past two decades, South Asia has attracted greater interest among business leaders, politicians and academics alike. It has become one of the most dynamic and fast-growing regions in the world, which many multinational companies consider as an important strategic growth market for their business activities, as they invest in local production facilities and integrate domestic companies into their value chains (Khilji, 2012; Khilji and Rowley, 2013).

Goldman Sachs (2011) predicts continued development in the region, as India is likely to emerge as world’s second largest economy by 2050, and Bangladesh and Pakistan have a high potential of becoming two of the world’s largest 11 economies (referred to as Next-11) in the twenty-first century, along with BRICS (Goldman Sachs, 2011). Recently, Pakistan has attracted US\$ 46 billions of investment from China, which is expected to boost Pakistan’s socio-economic development (CNN Money, 2015; *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015).

There are some unique contextual characteristics of the South Asian subcontinent. For example, the region has a significantly younger population that is continuing to grow. If qualified and skilled, then this population is likely to be in high demand in future global labor market (Khilji, 2012; Khilji and Keilson, 2014; Khilji *et al.*, 2015). Recent reviews of national talent development initiatives indicate that South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh, are acutely aware of a long-standing “leadership deficit”



there, with many reports indicating that the young have a growing level of anxiety about renewal of leadership (Khilji and Keilson, 2014; Masood, 2013). To address this, respective governments have implemented a wide range of leadership development initiatives. Further, scholars have also argued that the Indian subcontinent – given its fast-changing environment and resource constraints – should serve as a training ground for future global leaders (Khilji and Rowley, 2013; Power, 2011). In sum, there is a necessity to learn more about leadership in and from South Asia, because demographically and contextually, South Asia is likely to exert significant influences on global leadership research and practice (Pio and Syed, 2014).

From a gender perspective, the leadership field is strongly focused on, and influenced by, men. Some scholars have even argued that the term leadership is “conventionally constructed in masculine terms” (Kyriakidou, 2012, p. 4; Vinkenburg *et al.*, 2011). In order to overcome this limitation, several scholars have undertaken studies to examine leadership through a gender lens (Eagley and Heilman, 2015; Peus *et al.*, 2015). A majority of gender research has adopted an equity and fairness perspective, focusing on the gender gap in leadership (Hausmann *et al.*, 2011; Peus *et al.*, 2015; Schuh *et al.*, 2014). While this research has contributed fundamentally to the literature, it may be worthwhile to link leadership studies to broader domains of gender – including gender roles, identity, social location and relationships (Glynn and Raffaelli, 2010).

Previous research shows that entrepreneurial ventures provide women the opportunities to practice leadership (Bullough *et al.*, 2015). In other words, entrepreneurial creativity and independence may allow women to become effective leaders. Such topics are not only important for reconsidering the role of gender in leadership and evaluating conceptualizations of leadership but also most appropriate for South Asia where gender inequities appear to be more significant than in the west (UNDP, 2013).

However, there are also several South Asian women who are defying organizational and social norms (Pio and Syed, 2013). Some of these women are leading multinational corporations, while others are at the forefront of socio-economic change through their entrepreneurial ventures. For example, Malala Yusafzai’s effort for girls’ right to education, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw’s rise as the Indian biotech queen, Bibi Russell’s building of a pioneering fashion house in Bangladesh, Naina Lal Kidwai’s appointment as the Indian Country Head of HSBC, Nasreen Kasuri as the Founder of the international chain of Beaconhouse School System in Pakistan and Roshane Zafar’s drive as an award-winning Pakistani social entrepreneur.

Papers included in this SI highlight diverse, local and unexplored perspectives that can enrich theoretical developments in gender and leadership and offer “frame-breaking” insights (Youssef and Luthans, 2012). A brief overview of the papers is provided below.

In their paper titled “Navratna – the nine gems: illuminating enablers, barriers and vignettes of South-Asian women leaders”, Pio, Kilpatrick and LeFevre use the notion of Navratna, the nine precious gems of ancient Indian literature, to frame reflections on South-Asian women leaders. The authors discuss five barriers to women’s leadership in the region and also suggest five enablers to assist women to take up the challenges of leadership in South Asia. Then, taking the gems of leadership roles in business, politics, academia and other fields, the paper provides examples of women leaders “whose sparking excellence in their fields illuminates paths for others to follow”.

In their paper titled “Investigating the glass ceiling phenomenon: an empirical study of glass ceiling’s effects on selection, promotion and female effectiveness,” Rafiq, Saleem and Yousuf highlight hurdles in women’s progression to the organizational ladder through the concept of the glass ceiling. Their study shows how the glass ceiling results in gender inequality in high-ranking executive positions. Drawing on a survey of 210 respondents including CEOs, directors, managers and diverse professionals from public and private

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sectors, the study shows that the variables that influence the glass ceiling phenomenon include: female representation in the board of directors, stereotypical behavior and training and development of females. Further, this influence is examined regarding the selection and promotion of the females, as well as female effectiveness at work. The authors suggest that organizations ought to consider gender in their selection and promotion decisions. Emerging countries in Asia, such as Pakistan, need to develop policies to encourage active participation of the female workforce in upper echelon. This will reduce the dependency ratio of females, consequently driving national economic growth.

In their paper titled “Factors effecting career advancement of Indian women managers,” Datta and Agarwal explore the factors that have an effect on the women leadership pipeline of Indian organizations. Their study adopts a qualitative research methodology within a dyadic framework by including women managers and their respective supervisors in the study. The analysis reveals rich insights into the antecedent social-psychological factors of a women leadership pipeline that are summarized under three broad categories, i.e. intra-personal, interpersonal and organizational. The study contributes by exploring several social-psychological dimensions of objective-subjective career success perceptions and their interplay among the respondents. The findings suggest designing organizational interventions that can help women professionals in navigating the complex social environment in order to create their own leadership identities supported through a high quality leader-member exchange.

In their paper titled “Paradox of gender and leadership in India: a critical review of *Mardaani*,” Syed and Tariq shed light on the paradoxical and dynamic nature of gender and leadership in India through a critical review of Indian film *Mardaani* (meaning: mannish). The review shows that masculine stereotypes of leadership are simultaneously reinforced and shattered in the Indian context, and that despite all the odds, women’s role in organizations is characterized of dynamism and change. The authors situate this review in the broader context of gender, employment and leadership in India and offer a critical analysis. Their analysis has two implications. First, it indicates that women are equally capable of demonstrating worthy leadership. Second, it highlights that being a leader, or “mannish,” in the workplace does not mean that women are not responsible for the domestic and caring duties at home. In fact, female leaders in India continue to perform the double shift by struggling to balance their roles in the workplace and their personal lives.

In their paper titled “Engendering leadership in the Indian workplace: a framework on cross-level linkages,” Chakravarty and Bhatnagar capture the nuances of “gender diversity” at work from a grounded theory perspective by highlighting the viewpoints of women leaders in Indian organizations. The findings reveal that some Indian organizations, which have eliminated stereotyping and sex typing (stereotypical categorization of people according to conventional perceptions of sex) and have implemented equal opportunity policies and processes, have become preferred employers and achieved better business results. Organizations that have created gender neutralism by procreating a performance and talent-driven culture find themselves creating positive business results. This was made possible by involving all stakeholders in the efforts to remove and negate gender myths and biases. The study also suggests that a false sense of complacency, by creating rules and policies, which were never implemented in spirit, proved to be detrimental.

Overall these papers offer a glimpse of how gender plays out in leadership within South Asian organizations. This is an ongoing journey from dreams to realities where women are active agents in resisting and responding to structural and cultural constraints as well as taking hold of their own destiny by assuming leadership positions. We can easily draw four conclusions. First, South Asian women are strong and ambitious. They are making a mark in leadership, management and entrepreneurship. Every day, these women are fighting stereotypes of “being a professional woman” and “being a man to become a leader.” And much

like their counterparts globally, they have to also constantly manage expectations at home and workplace. Despite these challenges, South Asian women are continuing their journeys to create their own identities as professional women and leaders. Second, there are efforts underway within some progressive South Asian organizations to offer women equal opportunities. Third, there are inherent structural and cultural barriers within South Asia and South Asian organizations, which prevent women from succeeding and leading. Referred to as “gendered norms” (Kelly *et al.*, 2010), these negatively impact evolution of women’s careers; and create a glass ceiling. It is also clear that social roles continue to have an impact in organizations, and there are many situational and structural inequalities that disadvantage women in the workplace and society. Collectively, these papers highlight contextual factors, including stereotypes and power relations that play an important role in women’s daily interactions, and gender stereotypes that are embedded in organizational cultures. These papers offer evidence that social construction supports inequality within organizations, despite women’s efforts to define themselves in terms of their work and leadership goals. We believe that to truly support women’s leadership, initiatives would have to change organizational norms to support the legitimacy of woman as professionals and leaders, as someone who is involved in work and non-work responsibilities in pursuing their career (Kossek *et al.*, 2010). Finally, we conclude that South Asian professional women have much in common with women in the west. Stereotyping, gendered norms and glass ceiling are, in fact, broad global concepts and experienced by women everywhere (some places more than others though). Therefore, while South Asian women may have the same dreams, they also face very similar challenges.

Through this unique collection of review and empirical papers in this SI, we hope to foster research on gender and leadership from the South Asia region or from a South Asian perspective. We are confident that the SI will offer great insights for developing a contextual understanding of leadership in organizations in South Asia, in terms of how women’s potential as business leaders may be fully utilized as well as the issues and mechanisms for changes over time. It will also improve understanding of gender and social development in the region and globally; and allow us to understand the factors that influence them.

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