

FEMALE MANAGERS' PERCEPTION ON THEIR CAREER DIFFICULTIES COMPARING TO MALE COUNTERPARTS

(Case study at Vietnam National University and National Taiwan University)

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Abstract

The absence of women in senior roles and their disadvantages in management field is not a new problem. Research has consistently shown that men still disproportionately outnumber women in senior management positions, discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms and barriers to women in management exist worldwide. Within the academic environment, the situation seems not to be different, in spite of the raising number of female educational employees in universities, the over-representation of men in leadership there is still visible and recognized in the scholarly literature. Although many explanations and even suggestions for overcoming the gender stereotype have been made, difficulties and obstacles of women in managerial positions are not fully mentioned, especially in comparison to men and in academe. Through an online survey and some semi-structured interviews with female managers from National Taiwan University and Vietnam National University, this study is supposed to address this research gap and contribute to enlarging knowledge in the field of women and management which is not sufficient enough for the base of women empowering worldwide, especially within the academe. The result showed that women encounter more difficulties in their leadership than men and difficulties that female managers/leaders have to face more than male are abundant and diversified, all of which are related to gender bias, gender stereotypes.

Key words: women, manager, difficulty, Vietnam, Taiwan

Introduction

Women make up half of the world's population and nearly half of the world's labor force, but they are nowhere near making up half of the leadership contributions (Chartered Management Institute, 2014). The absence of women in senior roles and their disadvantages in management field is not a new problem. Research has consistently shown that men

still disproportionately outnumber women in senior management positions (Chartered Management Institute, 2014), discrimination against women manifests itself in various forms, including a lack of promotion opportunities (Sposito C., 2013) and barriers to women in management exist worldwide (Schein V., 2001).

Meanwhile, numerous studies have shown how effective leaders women can be and demonstrated why women are well suited to assume managerial and leadership positions at all levels. Leadership skills exhibited by women managers are strongly correlated to organizational success factors, such as retaining talent, customer satisfaction, employee engagement and the bottom line (Goldschmid, 2016), women are more skilled at interpersonal relationships and are, therefore, superior managers in present society (Yuki 2002 in Stoker J. et al 2012).

Within the academic environment (i.e university, for this study), the situation seems not to be different. According to Alwahaibi A. (2017), the under-representation of women (in particular at the higher levels of academia) has been well-documented over a number of years. As cited by Do (2013), in spite of the number of professional women leaders in universities, the over-representation of men is still visible and recognized in the scholarly literature, especially on university management and the academy (Brooks 2001; Goodman 2010; Morley 2005, 2006a in Do 2013). Similarly, Oram-Sterling (2015) notes that 'even with women accessing education at a much higher rate than men across the globe, their numbers in educational leadership positions are still sparse'. Thus, while the majority of educational employees are women, this is not the case when it comes to leadership positions (Dougherty, 2009 cited in Alwahaibi A. 2017).

When the obstacles holding women back from being promoted to managerial

positions and difficulties in their holding leadership roles are well recognized and acknowledged, there would be more chances of reducing gender inequality within the management sphere.

Taiwan comes out on top in Asia for gender equality for its Gender Inequality Index ranks eighth in the world and first in Asia (Drillsma, 2018), it is also among few countries in the world which has national female president. However, when it comes to the participation and power in public sphere, there is still a long way to go comparing men and women (Taiwan Women's Center, 2016). And the same goes for Vietnam. In the political sphere, Vietnamese women have advanced in status and position. To this point, Vietnam has been among the countries with the highest rate of female parliament members, ranked 43rd of 143 countries in the world and 2nd of the 8 ASEAN countries and also has a female national vice president and chairwoman of the Parliament. However, the rate of female participation in general leadership and management positions in Vietnam is growing slowly and unevenly (Nguyen Thi Van Hanh, 2016).

For its importance and potential impacts, scholars and policy makers have placed much focus on the situation of women within management. Research on women in management has become a significant field of study within the last twenty years (Sposito C., 2013). The literature shows that although many explanations and even suggestions for overcoming the gender

stereotype have been made, difficulties and obstacles of women in managerial positions are not fully mentioned, especially in comparison to men. For Taiwan in particular, “little research has been conducted on female managers in Taiwan” (Chou et al. 2005). In the Vietnam context, although gender equality issues have attracted a number of Vietnamese scholars in recent years, to date, there is no study published that deals with the interaction of gender, university education and women’s leadership (Do, 2013).

Accordingly, studying on the difficulties and obstacles of female managers in comparison to their male counterparts within the academic environment is significant as little has been known, especially on cross-national differences.

Taken all together, this study is supposed to address this research gap and contribute to enlarging knowledge in the field of women and management which is not sufficient enough for the base of women empowering worldwide, especially within the academe (so far, studies on women and management seem to focus on business women and female politicians rather than educators/researchers). Moreover, although there may have been many discussions on barriers and challenges for women career advancement, little is known about what kinds of difficulties they have to cope with in comparison to men.

Method

Population and sampling

The target population for this research defined to include the Taiwanese and

Vietnamese female managers/leaders from academic environment (national universities) (head/deputy head of department/faculty/division and higher) to explore their own experiences and point of view on the difficulties and obstacles of the managerial career.

A convenience sample was used for selecting the participants.

The target sample size of this study survey stands at 50 Taiwanese and 50 Vietnamese female managers, giving a total of 100 respondents. But due to difficulties in collecting data in Taiwan, the final size is 81.

Data collection

Questionnaire

As a questionnaire can cover every aspect of a topic and allow respondents to maintain their anonymity (for there may be some sensitive aspects within the field of gender and leadership) as well as for its easy analysis and visualization, this type of instrument was chosen for data collection in this study.

Moreover, quantified data will be appropriate for a comparative study.

Structured questionnaire with close-ended questions was used. The content of the survey instrument was based on the overall and specific objectives of the study.

The questionnaire have 4 sections: (1) personal information of the respondents; (2) difficulties and obstacles; (3) solving strategies; (4) needs for support to overcome barriers.

Result from only 3 out of 16 questions were used for this paper.

As the data collection was taken during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, online questionnaire was used for the safety of the respondents as well as the interviewer. Main methods of reaching the respondents was personal contact, mostly by email.

Lists of female managers/leaders in the two Universities and their email addresses was constituted using information on official websites and brochures.

Invitation email to take part in the survey with link to the online questionnaire was sent to those on the lists, in Vietnam all by the author and in Taiwan by the host institution (an institute belonging to National Taiwan University) where the author worked as a visiting scholar.

In Vietnam, the author tried to get as much as 50 respondents. In Taiwan, with every effort and support, the author could only get 31 responses, making the total 81.

**Semi-structured interviews*

Although quantitative data is easy to understand, to analyze and to make comparison, it is seldom enough to bring about a clear and detailed picture of the research issue, especially when it comes to deeper understanding of the issues with lots of unknown aspects. For that, qualitative input is needed. According to York (1998 in Bernard P. 2009), semi-structured interviews are halfway between the ends of structured and unstructured

interviews. The semi-structured interview consists of predetermined questions with an open-ended format. Semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail. Accordingly, 10 semi-structured interviews were made (7 for Vietnam and 3 for Taiwan) to gain more insightful information of the topic.

Data collection of the Vietnam participants was collected in May and June, data collection of the Taiwan participants was collected in September and October, 2020.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the distribution of the demographic characteristics of the participants as well as presented as proportions for categorical variables. Taiwanese – Vietnamese participants were compared using independent t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables (for variables with each cell having five or greater number).

When analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers named the categories, then coded the transcripts, and placed parts in labeled folders representing each category.

Result and discussion

Demographics characteristics of participants

Table 1: Demographics characteristics of participants (N=81)

Age	Below 30	4	4.9
	30-45	43	53.1
	Higher than 45	34	42.0
Educational level	Master	33	40.7
	Doctor	47	58.0
	Others	1	1.2
Seniority of Management	Less than 5 years	29	35.8
	5-10 years	30	37.0
	More than 10 years	22	27.2
Marital status	Married	64	79.0
	Single	8	9.9
	Divorced	6	7.4
	Others	3	3.7
Number of children	None	13	16.0
	1	22	27.2
	2	43	53.1
	More than 2	3	3.7
Workplace	Taiwan	31	38.3
	Vietnam	50	61.7

Table 1 showed the characteristics of the online survey participants. A total of 81 female managers/leaders NTU and VNU (head/deputy head of department/faculty/division and higher) completed the survey, 50 of whom were from Vietnam and the rest (31) were from Taiwan.

More than half of the participants (53.1%) were at the age 30-45, 42% were over 45 of age and only 4.9% were younger than 30.

Almost all of the participants had a master or doctor degree (40.7 and 58.0 respectively).

More than one third (35.8) of the participants had less than 5 years of seniority, 37.0% had 5-10 years and the rest (27.2) had more than 10 years.

More than half of the participants (53.1) had two children, 27.2% had one, 3.7 had more than two and 16.0% had none.

For the qualitative research sample, the description is as below:

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of qualitative sample

No	Position	Age	Education level	Seniority (year)	Marital status	Number of children
1	President	46	Doctor	>10	Married	2

2	Dean of the faculty	47	Doctor	>10	Married	2
3	Deputy head of the the Division	37	Doctor	5	Married	2
4	Director of the Center	38	Master	10	Married	2
5	Vice dean of the faculty	39	Master	4	Married	1
6	Deputy head of the Division	33	Master	2	Divorced	1
7	Vice dean of the faculty	36	Doctor	3	Married	2
8	Associate director of the department	50	Doctor	12	Married	3
9	Director of a subdivision	46	Master	6	Married	1
10	Associate Director	38	Master	4	Married	1

Opinion on whether female managers have to cope with more difficulties than male

The literature review has highlighted the challenges women encounter in accessing upper-level organizational leadership positions in comparison to their male counterparts. Moreover, women not only experience barriers and discrimination in accessing senior leadership positions, but

also, once they achieve such positions, they still have to face a number of complex challenges (Alwahaibi A. 2017).

The participants were asked about their opinions on the difficulties that female managers/leaders have to cope with in comparison to their male counterparts

Table 3: Opinion on whether female managers have to cope with more difficulties than male

	F	%	Taiwan	Vietnam	
As much as male managers	10	12.3	7 (22.6%)	3 (6.0%)	
Less than male managers	1	1.2	1 (3.2%)	0 (0%)	
More than male managers	63	77.8	21 (67.7%)	42 (84.0%)	
Hard to say	7	8.6	2 (6.5%)	5 (10.0%)	
Total	81	100.0	31 (100%)	50 (100%)	p=0.07

The largest number is the number of participants who thought female managers have to cope with *more difficulties than male* (77.8%). 12.3% of the participants considered the difficulties of female and male managers equal. 8.6% found it hard to say and only 1.2 (one case) believed that female managers have to deal with less difficulties. While the percentage result may show some difference between the two countries, chi-square test does not confirm. Regarding qualitative data, 7/7 Vietnamese interviewees deeply saw the disadvantages of female managers/leaders to their male counterparts while 2/3 Taiwanese slightly did.

This result goes well in line with another research on female managers of the US and Canadian universities which showed that only a few women (7%) believed that they

Table 4: Causes making female managers to have more difficulties than male

Causes	F	%	% Case
Women are physically weaker than men	25	11	35.2
Women have to give birth to and raise children	56	24.6	78.9
Women have to be responsible for domestic work	54	23.7	76.1
There are lots of social bias on women	49	21.5	69.0
Women have to face with discrimination	43	18.9	60.6
Women do not have the sufficient managerial competence	1	0.4	1.4
Total	228	100.0	

The two biggest reasons are “*Women have to give birth to and raise children*” and “*Women have to be responsible for domestic work*” (78.9 and 76.1 respectively). The causes of social bias and gender - based

were treated better than men due to their department’s or institution’s need to recruit and retain women, and some (17%) did not believe any difficulties they experienced were due to gender or felt they were treated the same as men in the same position. In contrast, 76 percent described negative treatment, policies, or incidents that disadvantaged them in their early careers (Martin J. 2011). Curtis (2011 cited in Leslie H. 2017) also purports that female faculty within higher education continue to be treated unfairly, as it relates to tenure, compensation and leadership opportunities when compared to their male counterparts.

Causes making female managers to have more difficulties than male

The respondents who believed female managers/leaders have more difficulties than male were asked to indicate the reasons.

discrimination are also popular with more than 60 to nearly 70 percent. About one third (35.2) believed that the cause may be women’s physical weakness and only 1.4% (one case) thought that women do not have the sufficient managerial competence. The

interviews brought along same results with causes like *“Limited time because of taking care of families”*, *“Physiological status (women has regular menstrual cycle, child bearing, menopause, etc.)”*, *“Stereotype in the workplace of women: is less experienced, less educated or capable”*, *“Family obligations, mom/ housewife should stay home and take care of family matters”*, *“more social pressure and less support”* etc.

Traditional gender roles continue to dominate everywhere, in the workplace as well as in personal and family life. Women are first and foremost seen as nurturers and caretakers of the family. Although responsibility for parenting and domestic activities has been more evenly divided in modern society, women still spend more time on parenting and housework than men (Jolly S. et al. 2014). Such deeply engrained traditional values and their resulting stereotypes have discouraged women from taking more active roles in the workforce, much less leadership positions (Cho Y. et al, 2015). While pregnancy and childbirth are natural functions of women, raising children and domestic work are not. And the fact that women have to responsible for childcare and household chores may be considered to derive from kinds of gender bias, gender stereotypes.

“Women are physically weaker than men” is a popular belief and more than one third of the respondents regarded this as the reason bringing more difficulties for female managers/leaders. Being a manager, longer working hours and more business trips will

cost more energy which someone who is physically weak can not afford. Parcheta N. et al. (2013) indicated that the difference in gender characteristics can be explained in part from biological factors. Women had the ability to give birth to children and were physically weaker than men due to their smaller bodies, which lead to working in the home. Men on the other hand were bigger and more capable to build, hunt, and protect their families. For thousands of years, women were viewed as the weaker sex.

Not only the biological factors, socially, women have to face more prejudices, discrimination and social pressures. Society still has some long standing views of women as the lesser sex and their place being in the home (Parcheta N. et al. 2013). Women are supposed to take charge of housework and childcare, when women need to return later from work, the family and even colleagues notices more, children and husbands complain (Hryniewicz L. & Vianna M. 2018) but it seems to be normal when a man coming home late from work. Dlamini and Adams (2014 in Leslie H. 2017) suggested that the inequitable treatment of women in organizations and society in general is a reflection of the “institutionalized” gender-based philosophy that place men as superior to women. The 2014 and 2015 World Economic Forum Reports indicated that gender inequality continues to be a key factor in defining how women are treated in major sectors of society (Leslie H. 2017).

All in all, the causes for women’s obstacles and difficulties in leadership seem to come

mostly from social and gender biases. As cited by Haile S., Emmanuel T. & Dzathor A. (2016), gender stereotypes and sexual tensions are big barriers for many women on career paths to top leadership management positions and even when they reach to the top, those barriers still remain.

Difficulties of female managers in comparison to male

Those aforementioned women's disadvantages to men can bring along lots of difficulties for them when it comes to leadership, some of which are shown in table 5 below.

Table 5: Difficulties of female managers in comparison to male

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. D	Taiwan	Vietnam	p
Less time as they have to take care of their families	80	1	3	2.62	.513	2.67	2.60	0.577
Being opposed more due to social bias	77	1	3	1.91	.653	2.13	1.77	0.015
Less chance of being promoted	77	1	3	1.94	.675	2.10	1.83	0.089
Having more pressure due to social bias	80	1	3	2.24	.661	2.26	2.22	0.826
Having less chance where "alcohol business transactions" happen	73	1	3	2.01	.697	2.26	1.87	0.029
Their competence and efficiency are less recognized	79	1	3	1.70	.627	1.71	1.69	0.879
Being more strictly evaluated	78	1	3	1.76	.687	1.58	1.87	0.066
Being more envied	78	1	3	1.88	.702	1.63	2.04	0.012
Receiving less support from family	77	1	3	1.73	.719	1.90	1.63	0.109
Valid N (listwise)	65							

The two most difficulties that female managers/leaders have to cope with more than male are the lack of time and social bias pressure (2.62 and 2.24 respectively). Another obstacle which were agreed (partly to totally) with high rate (more than 2) is the "alcohol business transactions". The six rest difficulties were picked with mean less than 2 meaning there were certain proportion of participants who did not think they are the difficulties that female managers have to suffer more. Comparing between the two

countries, Taiwanese respondents seemed to agree more with the two difficulties "Being opposed more due to social bias" and "Having less chance where "alcohol business transactions" happen" while Vietnamese respondents seemed to pick more of "Being more envied" difficulty.

Women all over the world have to be responsible for domestic work, no matter what their positions. When women also join the labor market and go to work, having working hour as much as men, they will

become busier and when women reach to leadership positions with more working hours, the lack of time will be more serious. And that is maybe the reason for respondents in this study to chose “Less time as they have to take care of their families” to be the most difficulty that female managers encounter in comparison to their male counterparts. 10/10 interviewees found their life became busier less time for themselves and their families since they took the leadership position.

Social bias on gender and gender stereotypes exist worldwide and have contributed to the low rate of women in senior management and leadership positions (Haile S., Emmanuel T. & Dzathor A. 2016). Women not only have to endure the social bias that they less deserve being leaders than men but once they become leaders they will have to suffer more from stereotypes such as people blaming them for not coming home soon for their children or housework, criticizing them to be too ambitious and less feminine. Women who choose careers over family or want to become leaders and still have a family too, are often labeled as somehow different, greedy or even strange (Lahti E. 2013). Six out of ten interviewees in the study found female managers/leaders to be treated differently (in a discriminated way) comparing to their male counterparts. They (female managers/leaders) may be looked down upon, more strictly evaluated or less likeable. Staff, peers, and others show more respect for directives given by male leaders than female leaders (Martin J. 2011).

The “alcohol business transactions” happen where people discuss and make business decisions during some drink or even when no business issues discussed, the drink can be used as a chance to gain agreement or win the “heart” of the business partners for better cooperation afterward. This kind of business culture will create difficulties for women as their ability to drink is often lower than men, they (women) also do not want to take part in those drink for safety concern. Moreover, as shown in a research conducted by Catalyst (2003 in Bernard P. 2009), since men often discuss business strategies during side bars and segregated gatherings, women quite often find themselves isolated from critical information shared. Isolation of information may diminish women’s opportunity to be armed with viable information and to obtain the experience required to be competent on the job.

Current research still reports managers and leaders being thought of as “male” rather than “female” (Denmark F. & Paludi M. 2018), think managers think male, in other words. Since there are lots of social bias on women and their social roles, in taking leadership positions, women may encounter more obstacles such as being opposed, being more envied, more strictly evaluated, less being supported by family, less recognized or having less chance of promoted.

Those findings are in line with many other previous studies. For example, Fernández Palacín et al., 2010; Northouse, 2012; Powell, Butterfield & Parent, 2002 (in Rincón V; González, M; Barrero, K. 2017)

indicated that women, possibly due to prejudices regarding their experience in work situations, usually have fewer opportunities for development than men. In human resource selection and promotion processes, men receive better scores than women for management positions, since as a general rule, leadership is linked to traits associated with masculinity. Others also stated when women challenge social norms and try to access leadership positions, a certain contradiction occurs between traditional leadership and gender roles, and they often must face social rejection (Bowles & McGinn, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; García-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2007; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001 in Rincón V; González, M; Barrero, K. 2017).

One reason why men get promoted quicker than women indicated by Parcheta N. et al. (2013) is because they are more willing to relocate and it is more acceptable to move the family for the husband's job. Men also have the ability to work longer hours since the wife takes on the primary caretaking of the children and home. Meanwhile, the women's less of being recognized than men was also mentioned in Haile S., Emmanuel T. & Dzathor A. (2016) that "another challenge leading to under representation of women in top business leadership positions around the world is the failure to capitalize on the talents of women in the workforce" and in Denmark F. & Paludi M. (2018) that "women receive lower recognition....even when they have the same, if not more, training than their male counterparts". In

other words, women's performance, credentials, and workplace outcomes, when they mirror men's, are not evaluated in a fashion similar to men's. This reality may partially explain why women do not have equitable access to positions of leadership (Denmark F. & Paludi M. (2018).

All things considered, difficulties that female managers/leaders have to face more than male are abundant and diversified, all of which are related to gender bias, gender stereotypes.

Limitation

This study has some limitations.

Firstly, the sample is non - probability and small, hence the research result can not be generalized.

Secondly, research environment is only academe.

Future researches on the same topic should consider probability bigger sample size as well as widen research environment (to other sectors rather than the academe).

Conclusion

This study aims at obtaining an insight into the difficulties and obstacles that female managers working in the academic environment of Taiwan and Vietnam have to face up with in comparison to their male counterparts. Based on the findings, some tentative conclusion can be made as below:

- Women encounter more difficulties in their leadership than men;

- Gender stereotypes, sexual tensions are the main causes for difficulties suffered more by female managers/leaders;
- Difficulties female managers/leaders have to face more than male exist in different ways but the most popular are having less time and more pressure;
- There are not much significant differences between female managers in Taiwan and Vietnam.

Some recommendations were also made.

- Discrimination against women continues in educational settings around the world and is particularly apparent when one examines the presence of women in higher level academic positions (Morley, 2006 in Denmark F. &Paludi M. 2018). When powerful women are seen as exceptional and/or exhibiting masculine traits, women's leadership can not have much effect on gender stereotypes and norms (O'Neil T. & Domingo P. 2016). The number of female managers/leaders in general and in academe in particular need to raise so that gender stereotypes and expectations could change. Framing policies that place specific focus on providing opportunities for more females to access leadership positions would be a step in the right direction.
- In today's society women are still seen as wives and mothers, even when they are highly qualified for a

leadership position (Denmark F. &Paludi M. 2018). As family burden is a very big obstacles for female managers/leaders, organizations which want to retain more women with families should become more family-friendly. Many things could be done to keep and empower women. Organizations can offer flex time, family-friendly policies, including career break policies for faculty who need to integrate work and life roles, satellite positions working from home and childcare services for examples.

- As children, we are conditioned to think that there are certain jobs that we must do, certain things that are suitable for men or women only and it is difficult to change that even in adulthood. The way we teach our children, therefore, should be changed, boys and girls need to be socialized in the same way toward their career, family responsibilities and social roles.

Gender disparity among leadership positions differ in many sectors. However, they are particularly alarming amongst university educators and higher level positions within the realm of academia such as dean, provost, or president (Denmark F. &Paludi M. 2018). Female managers/leaders in academia still face discriminations and more difficulties than their male counterparts.

Successful achievement for women is costly but worthy for themselves and for the organizations and the whole society as well.

This research result, together with other researches (Lanier et al. 2009 in Leslie H. 2017) supports the argument that significant progress has taken place in creating an equitable working environment in academia, but more will need to be done for gender equality in general and in the management sector in particular in academe.

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