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Identity vs Career: Muslim Women at Cross Cultural Roads in Corporation

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Abstract: *This paper targets to explore the black box of Muslim women's identity in local corporations in Pakistan and figure out its influence on the career trajectory of Muslim women. Scholarship (Syed & Pio, 2010) has already highlighted the issue of the identity of Muslims Women and its impact on career growth in Western countries. However, it has never been realized that Muslim women's identity would be an issue in Pakistan. Consistently, this issue is missed out to be focused; this research is going to focus on this missing clue between research and practice. It reduces the knowledge gap for Pakistan, a country under-represented in the discourse on careers and supports the calls for contextualizing knowledge. Through qualitative research, this paper extends a rare in-depth insider's insight while exploring the impact of adherence to Muslim identity on women's careers.*

Key Words: Muslim Women Identity, Career, Dress Code, Contextualizing, Professional Women, Pakistan

Introduction

Identity is one of the fundamental concepts of human behaviour that defines an individual and sets the framework for social conduct (Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). In the realm of organizational literature, social identity theory and identity theory are the two fundamental models for understanding identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). Social identity theory defines how an individual categorizes oneself within a social system to perform distinct social roles (Tajfel & Turner, 1986); whereas identity theory focuses on how categorized roles contribute to the development of an individual's identity (Hogg et al., 1995; Stryker & Burke, 2000). While focusing on the issue at hand, the perspective of social identity theory will be used.

Muslim women's identity in the context of their careers remains one of the important topics in mainstream research (King & Ahmad, 2010; Padela et al., 2016; Syed & Pio, 2010). Syed and Pio (2010)

conducted exploratory research on Muslim immigrants in Sydney, Australia and pointed out the impact of macro-level influences on their experience as ethnic minority women, including social stereotypes based on their dress, hijab, skin colour, and religious practices. This study has also revealed that these women had low-status jobs and complaint about workplace structures, such as the dress code policy or socializing events that did not fit their religious worldview. The participant of this research (Muslim women) also confessed to discrimination based on gendered divisions of labour (Syed & Pio, 2010).

Scholarship highlighted gender as a significant phenomenon influencing career success across the world (Arif, 2011; Green et al., 2004). This is because it is one of the fundamental factors that shape workplace models and lifestyle (Green et al., 2004); again, career satisfaction comes from following

masculine performance norms and models (Broadbridge, 2007). So, if women really want to move forward in career echelons, they have to follow masculine ways. Otherwise, their career growth will not be smooth. An explicit justification for this phenomenon is that women experience more challenges on the path of career growth as compared to men (Madsen & Blide, 1992). With this intellectual background, one can understand the severity of the impact of gender on the career growth of women in Pakistan (Arif, 2011). Gunz, Mayrhofer and Tolbert (2011) have already highlighted that specific context (e.g., socio-economic, political and technical arrangement) is the fundamental factor in which a person achieves and enjoys career success. Literature on working women in Pakistan has highlighted the challenges women face in the workplace (Saher, Matloob, Ali and Batool, 2014; Grünenfelder, 2012; Saher, Khan and Khan, 2012; Saher, 2010; Syed, Ali and Winstanley, 2005). The prevailing situation would become severe when these women would further seclude themselves even within women in the organization by explicitly maintaining the identity of Muslim women, as Syed et al. (2005) mentioned women's situation in conflicting role demands.

This paper aims to explore how Muslim women's identity influences the pursuance of a career in Pakistani corporations. The model of 'bureaucratic career' has been used the most relevant to the Pakistani context and the issue at hand. This model pointed out the higher chance of growth for employees who comply with the system and culture of the organization (McKinlay & Wilson, 2006). Consistently, conscious efforts are made to develop more employee integration through official mechanisms of control (such as performance appraisals and ratings), as well as un-official mechanisms (socializing, official attire, hair, colours etc.) were socializing with colleagues and customers, long working hours are accepted as organizational norms and part of the job (Grey, 1994, p. 494). These special features of the model of 'bureaucratic career' facilitate actualizing the main objectives of this research paper. In the upcoming section, we will try to set the context of the research.

Setting the Context

In the context of career research, the issue of diversity of definitions and unaligned definitions

gives way to confusion, and there is no agreement on one definition. The word career, derived from the Latin word *carraria*, means a carriage road or road-- it is a person's course or progress through his or her life. A career is a series of job-related positions that a person gets during his lifetime (London & Stampf, 1982).

McKinlay and Wilson (2006) highlighted the concept of a bureaucratic career (in developing countries context) in which the main purpose of organizational routines is to monitor, track, and make employees' behaviour compliant with organizational norms. If an employee is more aligned (complying) with organizational practices and norms, there are higher chances for career progression. Likewise, Savage (1998) defines a linear or bureaucratic career as a disciplinary practice used by organizations to control employees' career paths. Similarly, Mckinlay (2002) also considers a career as an approach of supervision in which an employee regulates his behaviour according to the organizational norms and compliance with norms results in career advancement. Along with these official mechanisms of control (such as performance appraisals and ratings), organizations also deploy un-official mechanisms (social networking/socializing, professional attire in dress, hair, colours) where socializing with colleagues and customers, long working hours are accepted as organizational norms and part of the job (Grey, 1994, p. 494). The concept of a bureaucratic career seems more relevant to Pakistan. A specific context (e.g., socio-economic, political and technical arrangement) is the fundamental factor in which a person achieves and enjoys career success (Gunz, Mayrhofer, & Tolbert, 2011).

Pakistani culture has been portrayed as a culture of collective self-identity (collectivism), stratification (inequality) and female segregation (Lyon, 2000). Gender relations are regulated and maintained through the institution of *Purdah* in Pakistan (Besio, 2006). Women's mobility and interaction are associated with the family's respect; therefore, female-male interaction and mobility are avoided as much as possible (Saher, Khan and Khan, 2012). Women's spaces are defined and given specific space protocol and are often segregated (secluded from "male space") (Grünenfelder, 2012; Syed, Ali and Winstanley, 2005; Saher, Khan and Khan, 2012). Now

Pakistani businessmen are trying to survive in the current globalized cut-throat competition through playing by following the model and style of foreign firms. Consistently, a westernized makeover (office interior, gender egalitarian sitting layout, dressing of employees etc.) on priority is used for generating an image of a modern organization. In this environment, adjustment and smooth function of Muslim women while maintaining their identity is a complex phenomenon.

Syed and associates (2005) unravel the moral and emotional dilemma that women experience in such a context. Ghunman and Jackson (2008) figure out comparatively lower job prospects for women maintaining Muslim identity in the USA. Even in Pakistan, as Shareef (2015) figures out, the management of modern organizations shows discrimination in taking women with traditional Muslim attire despite their relevant qualifications and skills for a particular job on the plea of liberal policies/image demands.

In a country like Pakistan, where working women are experiencing biases in all spheres of life, biases in organizations can be understood; these are prevalent at all stages of career (recruitment, selection, evaluation, promotion etc.) (Saher, Ali, Matloob, 2014; Arfi, 2011). Literature additionally highlights the phenomena of the sticky floor, glass walls (Amos-Wilson, 1999), and glass ceiling (Shah, 1999) to limit the progress of women on a horizontal and vertical level. These women are not only ignored in the formal mechanism of career success but also in informal career mechanisms of mentoring and social networking (Saher & Mayrhofer, 2014; Khilji, 2003; Saher, 2010). The intellectual insight and general observations depict that all these phenomena will become severe for the woman maintaining her Muslim identity through her behaviour and attire. This notion, in fact, secludes women (explicit expressing their Muslim identity) from the processes and social circles required for career progression in Pakistan.

Research Methodology and Methods

A qualitative research methodology with descriptive methods is used for the present study to develop a more holistic, in-depth and detailed view of the issue at hand. This method systematically examines the

phenomenon of explicit Muslim identity and its influence on career prospects. This research was conducted in Islamabad. For data collection, we used in-depth interviews and observation techniques. Through purposive sampling, fifteen women whom explicit maintained their Muslim identity (wearing Abaya, veiling/covering their face, covering themselves with a sheet/chaddar etc.) were selected from five corporations on the basis of their availability and willingness to share their experiences. These interviews were conducted with the help of an interview guide in Urdu and English language as respondents were switching codes between these two languages. These interviews lasted for 30-40 minutes and were conducted in the organizations. For the analysis of field data, an inductive approach was used to extract the themes manually from the responses and then categorize them into multiple themes with the mutual consensus of the researchers.

Field Data and Discussion

The field data has pointed out that women face difficulties in becoming a part of mainstream activities, developing positive interpersonal communication and relationship, social networking and inclusion in career growth opportunities.

The analysis of the field data indicates that women are revealing Muslim identity through their attire and experience hindrances in open interaction and communication with their colleagues in the studied corporations. These women follow modest and careful manners during interacting with male colleagues and customers, as revealed by the respondents. The data also highlighted that the respondents used Urdu and English language and maintained formal protocol in their organizational communication, especially in cross-gender conversations. One of the field respondents explained this phenomenon in the following words:

I keep myself reserved. My interaction, voice tone, and delivery of words give my colleagues a clear message that I am a formal person. In our culture women with an open and informal communication style are not respected. I am from an honourable family and can't afford any anomaly".

Research findings also reveal that the male employees understand the behavioural cues and

manners of these women as it is a cultural model of good women in Pakistan. Therefore, they avoid direct interaction with them during meetings, conferences, and social gatherings. In this way, these women maintain an exclusion in the workplace that, in turn, hinders their inclusion in mainstream organizational activities and organizational culture. A respondent shared that

Higher authorities misperceived this notion of avoidance of women and considered its lack of skills and confidence to interact and communicate with male colleagues. They also think these women are less productive and less efficient. Consistently, they don't consider these women for administrative and other higher-level positions in their corporation".

The field data analysis has also shown that male-female joint office layout is also an issue of concern for Muslim women as it influences their life and performance in the organization. The respondents shared that employee diversity is recognized as a source of creativity and performance across the world, but unfortunately, our organizations are overlooking this phenomenon. These organizations are not introducing strategies to adjust diverse employees in the organization for the effectiveness of the individual, department and the whole system.

In a similar vein, another respondent pointed out that these activities, which were considered important for career growth in our social context, create a more difficult situation and inequality in professional opportunities for Muslim women, specifically when they do not want to participate in these social gatherings. She further explained that higher authorities considered it significant for their employees to participate in these activities for better integration and assimilation with each other and organizational culture, so the employees who avoid participating missed out on important opportunities to become part of in-groups and networks. She further highlighted;

These gatherings are a crucial platform to develop working relationships with other colleagues from different departments that are helpful in different situations. Sometimes, I want to be part of these gatherings and meetings because I am clear about their results in my career growth. But as a representative of an honourable family, it does not suit me to attend these events such as parties after

job hours or sometimes late-night dinners at other places."

These women's access to in-group membership, mentoring relations, and social networks is not an easy task which is considered important for career growth, as unravelled by the data. Results also show that the gender of the employees directly influences the access of employees to social networks and groups in these corporations (as shown in mainstream research); women have experienced glass walls and glass ceiling to enter and grow in these social networks, which is further restricted for Muslim women's participation. This issue is further elucidated by one of the respondents. She shares her experience of isolation and exclusion from her departmental social networks and its effect on her access to different opportunities and career growth. She points out,

I just mind my business in the organization and don't participate in the social activities going on in the office, which is negatively perceived because my other female colleagues participate in all activities. These gatherings are vital to have good contacts with senior male colleagues and to be a part of mainstream social circles. I am aware of the negative consequences of my choice of maintaining Muslim identity on my growth in organizations."

The impact of maintaining Muslim identity on working women's career growth at workplaces has been explored in many western contexts. Scholarship reflects that maintaining Muslim women's attire as a distinct social institution signifies the wearer's identity and associated ideological meanings (Hoodfar, 2003). The obtained information from our respondents' experiences reflects that working women in Pakistan also consider that the attire of a Muslim woman passes on a particular image to the people and surroundings.

The results of the field have shown that Muslim women find it difficult to adhere to formal and informal requirements of organizations which are in sharp contrast to their religious values of modesty and purdah. The results argue that women's preference to maintain a particular dress appearance and segregation creates hindrances to growth in career. The inconsistency between their expected organizational roles and cultural roles places a burden on these women. This ongoing exclusion of these

women minimizes their chances to move forward professionally on the echelon of careers. In addition to this, results highlight that women feel psychologically suppressed in workplaces due to less involvement with colleagues and adjustment in the organization. Additionally, the field data reflects that women with Muslim attire experience discrimination at their workplaces. This discrimination includes negative treatment towards these women and often a lack of consideration for important assignments by authorities during meetings, seminars, conferences, or other important events. In a similar vein, these women are not acknowledged for the higher position, which is in line with research results (Syed & Pio, 2005). It also includes authorities' unfavourable judgment in the selection and promotion processes and exclusion of these women. Finally, the research has unravelled the negative impact of this discrimination on workers' employment, job outcomes, and career progression, which is also in line with scholarship (Priola & Brannan, 2009; Krings & Olivares, 2007).

Research Results and Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the influence of Muslim women's identity on their careers in corporations in Pakistan. For this purpose, the model of 'bureaucratic career' is used as it is more relevant to our context. The main purpose of this approach is to monitor, track, and make employees' behaviour compliant with organizational norms. This is because the basic values of Pakistani culture, i.e., collectivism, inequality and gender segregation, match more with this approach. According to this model, employees more aligned (comply) with organizational practices

and norms get higher chances for career progression (McKinlay & Wilson, 2006). This approach administers employees' integration through official mechanisms of control (such as performance appraisals and ratings), as well as un-official mechanisms (social networking/socializing, professional attire in dress, hair, colours, where socializing with colleagues and customers, long working hours are accepted as organizational norms and part of the job (Grey, 1994, p. 494). Field data concludes that Muslim identity further adds to the already existing hurdles in the way of women's career progression as it would not let these women match with working models and integrate into the office environment. Consistently, these women faced more problems in all aspects of career advancement; to become mainstream workers, develop positive interpersonal communication and relationships with colleagues (at horizontal and vertical levels), social networking and career growth opportunities. Additionally, results reflect that these women faced discrimination as being undervalued for different organizational activities that limited their chances for career advancement compared to other women without a headscarf. These women are considered less active and conservative in their outlook; hence, they face discrimination in having access to different organizational opportunities for prestigious decision-making positions within their organizations due to associated negative perceptions about them. Besides, not being considered in key projects leads to a poor profile of these females which affects their promotion possibilities later on. The current research suggests that future research may also incorporate the voice of the males regarding the issue at hand.

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