Barriers against Women’s Career Progression: 
A Comparative Study between Australia and South Korea

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December 2005, Canberra, Australia
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Abstract

Researches on barriers against women’s career progression have been conducted in order to explain women’s underrepresentation in management. Barriers against managerial women’s career advancement can be categorised as cultural barriers including gender stereotypes, institutional barriers including blocked promotion, individual barriers including personality traits, and family-bounded barriers including family responsibilities. Literature on women’s career progression in Australia and in South Korea are firstly reviewed, then research questions are suggested. Theoretical and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

Key Words

Bars, Women’s career progression, Women's underrepresentation, Australia, South Korea.

Over the last two decades, research has focused on the career progress of women in organizations, and a number of researchers found that women have been increasing their numbers in management positions (Morley, Bellamy, Jackson and O’Neill, 2002; O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; Wood and Lindorff, 2001). However, those researches have focused specifically on the experience of women (Morley, Bellamy, Jackson and O’Neill, 2002; O’Leary, 1997; O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; Wentling, 2003; White, 1995; Wood and Lindorff, 2001). These are not mainstreamed in management literature, organizational strategy and policy or in career management practice and therefore have little impact on the future careers of women in management. As a consequence, barriers against women’s career progression and its impact on management, have been an issue of growing interest to organizations and academic researchers (Metz and Tharenou, 2001).

BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN’S CAREER PROGRESSION
Researchers have examined barriers against women’s career progression in order to explain women’s underrepresentation in management (Cooke, 2001; Fagenson, 1990; Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004; Ibarra, 1993; Lemons, 2003; Maddock and Parkin, 1993; Rosser, 2004), and those barriers can be categorised as cultural, institutional, individual, and family-bounded (Rosser, 2004).

Women tend to be more aware of gender culture at work than men, precisely because they are aware of how it restricts their behaviour and expression (Maddock and Parkin, 1993; Rosser, 2004). Men, on the other hand, usually felt more comfortable with the prevailing atmosphere at work (Kanter, 1977). Gender culture has been found as a barrier to women’s career progression by a number of researchers (Lemons, 2003; Maddock and Parkin, 1993; Ragins, 1996; Rosser, 2004), and those researchers have tried to identify specific cultural barriers against women’s career progression. Cultural barriers include gender stereotypes (Maddock and Parkin, 1993; O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; Still and Timms, 2000), prejudices (Maddock and Parkin, 1993), discrimination (Rosser, 2004), harassment (Rosser, 2004), and sex-role expectations (Ragins, 1996). Researchers have also found that there have been a number of institutional or organizational barriers against women’s career progression (Cooke, 2001; Davidson and Burke, 1994; Ibarra, 1993; Kanter, 1977; Rindfleish, 2000). Lower level managerial positions (O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999), dysfunctional legislations (Rindfleish, 2000), lower earnings (ABS, 2002), blocked promotion (Cassell, 2000; Okanlawon, 1994), negative attitudes toward women as managers (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Davidson and Burke, 1994), limited access to interaction networks (Ibarra, 1993; Kanter, 1977), and gender inequality in recruitment (Cooke, 2001) have been found as main institutional barriers against women’s career progression. In addition, some researchers
claimed that women’s low representation in management is caused by factors internal to women – they
possess personality traits and behaviours that are inappropriate for key managerial jobs (Fagenson, 1993,
1994; Horner, 1972; Parker and Fagenson, 1994; Riger and Galligan, 1980). Women are believed to
be less likely to possess the skills, knowledge and abilities needed for management than their male
counterparts (Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003). Longitudinal studies have found that ambition (Howard
and Bray, 1988) is strong predictor of advancement in management for women. In addition to
ambition, masculine gender roles appear to be synonymous with being a manager (Schein, Mueller,
Lituchy and Liu, 1996). Kirchmeyer (1998) found that femininity had a negative effect on women’s
income and level, and masculinity had a positive effect on their income. Tharenou (2001) also found
that masculinity was one of the strongest predictors of advancement for men and women. Researchers
and feminists have suggested that there have been a number of family-bounded barriers against
women’s career progression (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999; Okanlawon, 1994; Olsson and Pringle,
2004; Rosser, 2004; Still, 1997). The responsibility for children and family is one of the main barriers to
women (Schwartz, 1989; Wentling, 2003). There is evidence to show that women still take on the
caring responsibilities in the home, whether it is caring for children or for elderly relatives (Sargeant,
2001). Inevitably, these responsibilities can have a restrictive impact on women’s careers, thus
creating a barrier to their development (Sargeant, 2001; Wilson, 2003). Table 3.1 exhibits previous
research on barriers against women’s career progression.

Table 1
Research on Barriers against Women’s Career Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Factors (Barriers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carney, O’Kelly</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>√ (1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooke</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>√ (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cordano, Scherer, Owen</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>√ (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fagenson</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>√ (1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon, Whelan-Berry</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>√ (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ibarra</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>√ (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maddock, Parkin</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>√ (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okanlawon</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>√ (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raggins</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>√ (1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosser</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>√ (2004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, none of them included a comprehensive range of factors affecting women’s career progression although it is suggested that managerial advancement is influenced by a range of factors (Metz and Tharenou, 2001; Raggins and Sundstorm, 1989). In addition, only few suggested how to reduce or eliminate those barriers, most of them only included findings of their research as an explanation of women’s underrepresentation in management. Therefore, this study will include a comprehensive range of factors influencing women’s career progression in order to examine what barriers most likely affect women’s career progression, and what strategies can be drawn to eliminate
those barriers.

BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN’S CAREER PROGRESSION IN AUSTRALIA

Researches on barriers against women’s career progression have been conducted in Australia (Brown and Ridge, 2002; Metz, 2003; Morley, Bellamy, Jackson and O’Neil, 2002; Noble and Mears, 2000; O’Connor, 2001; O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; Rindfleish and Sheridan, 2003; Still, 1997; Still and Timms, 1998, 2000; Tilbrook, 1998). Gender stereotypes have been said to be a significant barrier or circumstance facing managerial women in Australia, with many women believing that their perceived non-acceptance by certain sections of the business community and particular clients makes it difficult for them to keep their work effectively (Still and Timms, 2000). Women’s underrepresentation in Australia can be reflected in the persistent concentration of women in traditional women’s occupations and part-time work, and therefore female employees continue to have lower earnings in Australia (ABS, 2002). In addition, the lack of access of networks and mentors are also portrayed as limiting factors to managerial women in Australia (Flinders University of South Australia, 1996). Australian women who do full-time paid work still do not on average get much help from children or husbands. Consequently, the current generation of Australian wives is not always happy with marriage (Maushart, 2001). There is a case to be made that ‘wife work’ (housework, childcare, and looking after the husband’s emotional well-being) is done mainly by wives, and women feel that this as unfair (Maushart, 2001).

Some researches conducted in Australia included a range of factors affecting women’s career progression. For example, Metz (2003) examined institutional, individual, and family-bounded factors as an explanation of women’s lack of representation in management in Australia. Some researchers
included two factors influencing women’s career progression at the same time, and tried to find out the
main barriers against women’s career progression (Morley, Bellamy, Jackson, and O’Neil, 2002; Still,
1997; Tilbrook, 1998). Table 2 shows previous research on women’s career progression in Australia.

Table 2
Research on Barriers against Women’s Career Progression in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Family-bounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Noble &amp; Mears</td>
<td>✓ (2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>O’Connor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ (2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’Sullivan &amp; Sheridan</td>
<td>✓ (1999)</td>
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</table>

However, research that examined cultural, institutional, individual, and family-bounded barriers at the
same has never been found in literature. In addition, even though most of the research have found the
main barriers affecting women’s career progression, none of them suggested the way in which those
barriers can be eliminated. Some of them (Metz, 2003; O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; Still and Timms,
2000) suggested strategies how to advance women’s career, but those were briefly mentioned in their
implications for future research. In this regard, two research questions have been set up in this study.

*RQ1 What are the main barriers against women’s career progression in Australia?*
**BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN’S CAREER PROGRESSION IN SOUTH KOREA**

The dominant influence on Korean culture has been Confucianism (Chow, 1994). Although religions such as Buddhism, Shamanism and more recently Christianity have all played an important role in Korean culture, Confucianism has had the most profound influence on Korean culture (Hwang, 1996). Confucianism came to Korea from China in the 5th century (Chow, 1994) and dominated the customs, traditions, value systems, and everyday lives of Korean women for centuries. Traditionally, with Confucian culture, Korean society has been male-dominated, the man leads the family as an economic provider while the wife manages the household and nurtures children (Lee and Keith, 1999). In employment, although the law guarantees equal employment for women, discrimination against female employees have been existed. Female workers are generally paid less than their male counterparts and are expected to resign upon getting married (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997). In traditional Korean society, women’s roles were confined to the home (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997; Lee and Keith, 1999; Park, 1999). From a young age, women were taught the virtues of subordination and endurance to prepare for their future roles as wife and mother (Song, 2001). Women in general could not participate in society as men did, and their role was limited to household matters (Lee and Keith, 1999). The situation began to change with the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 when women achieved constitutional rights for equal opportunities to pursue education, work and public life (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997). Although there is no doubt that the underpaid and underrepresented female labour force contributed crucially to the rapid economic growth that Korea achieved during the past
decades, traditional Korean culture still affects women’s role today in household chores and in taking care of children and the elderly, giving them an inherent disadvantage in their professional careers (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997; Kim, 1996; Park and Liao, 2000). Some steps are being taken to rectify the discrimination based on gender, many still face significant obstacles in the workplace (Park and Liao, 2000). In addition, women in well-paid managerial positions are still rarity in South Korea (August and Tuten, 2003). Despite extremely rapid economic growth during the 1970s and early 1980s, the ratio of female to male earnings in Korea remained virtually stagnant at 47 per cent (Yoo, 2003). In South Korea, the implication of traditional ideologies still restrict working women by the great demand of housework and childcare responsibilities although Korean society has recently changed from the restrictive practice of Confucian ideology in family life with more women holding less traditional attitudes (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997; Lee and Keith, 1999). As a result, most women workers in South Korea have experienced pressure due to the limited time to manage their multiple roles, and such pressure has been perceived as a barrier to Korean women who want to enter the paid-workforce (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997; Lee and Keith, 1999). Table 3 shows previous research on barriers against women’s career progression in South Korea.

Table 3
Research on Barriers against Women’s Career Progression in South Korea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Factors (Barriers)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August &amp; Tuten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chung, Lee &amp; Jung</td>
<td>✓ (1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee &amp; Keith</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Seo</td>
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</table>

However, researches only included one or two factors influencing women’s career progression. Further, strategies to enhance women’s career progression in South Korea have not been suggested. In order to address this deficiency, this study will include a range of barriers against women’s career progression in South Korea. In this regard, two research questions have been set up.

**RQ3** What are the main barriers against women’s career progression in South Korea?

**RQ4** What strategies can be drawn to enhance women’s career progression in South Korea?

In addition, for comparative purposes, two additional research questions have been set up in this study.

**RQ5** What are the similarities/differences of the barriers against women’s career progression between Australia and South Korea?

**RQ6** What are the similarities/differences of the strategies to enhance women’s career progression between Australia and South Korea?
**IMPLICATIONS**

‘Women’s progression’ means the increase in their economic participation and equal opportunity and equal treatment at workforce, as well as the discarding of the discriminatory perception of women in society (August and Tuten, 2003; Davidson and Burke, 1994; Yoo, 2003). This means that women, as members of society, should take equal responsibility and share equal burdens for the society where legal and social system backed up equally to women. In this regard, understanding barriers against women’s career progression will help this. The problem and barriers that women have faced should be recognised as social problems and should be resolved through national concern and policies (Park and Liao, 2000). This will lead the development of women and therefore of the society and of the country (Chung, Lee and Jung, 1997; Still and Timms, 2000).

Further, today, as economies become increasingly global, a number of countries are oriented toward multiculturalism, cross-cultural studies have become more important (Jacobson and Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001). However, very few comparative studies between Australia and South Korea have been conducted. Detailed studies on barriers against women’s career progression between Australia and South Korea have never been conducted. Therefore, this study will address this deficiency by examining barriers against women’s career progression in Australia and in South Korea. Although conducting integrated research in comparative manner is obviously difficult, it is known that cross-cultural study offers the complex and holistic perspective necessary to a richer understanding of pluralism and global diversity (Jacobson and Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001). Therefore, this comparative study between countries will be of importance as it theoretically provides insights into international and
multicultural context, and practically helps international business with understanding of differences one
another (Grainger and Hedges, 1999).

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