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### **Through the Eyes of the Other: Gender Diversity Education in Non- Western Contexts**

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## **Through the Eyes of the *Other*: Gender Diversity Education in Non-Western Contexts**

*In this essay I challenge the dominant Western paradigm that characterizes the conceptualization and education of gender diversity management. First I discuss the hegemonic nature of Western management education, including diversity education, and the contextual challenges that inscribe this hegemony. I then explain how and why Western conceptualization on gender equality may prove problematic in other cultural contexts. Here I draw on interviews with diversity instructors in Pakistan to explore the utility of Western management texts on gender equality. The discussion points towards the pedagogical challenges associated with the fundamental paradox inherent in the Western model of diversity education.*

*Our call is for ‘no more colonization’, and for adding restlessness to the ways in which knowledge is being constructed, disseminated, and possibly deconstructed, destructed and re-constructed in higher education world-wide (Jaya, 2001: 232).*

The discourse surrounding managing diversity originated in the US and has been generally adopted across Western countries including the UK, Canada, and Australia (Agocs & Burr, 1996; Jain & Verma, 1996). This discourse is shaped by the demographic, socio-cultural and economic realities in the US and other Western contexts. With the increased awareness of the need to understand and manage a diverse workforce has come a proliferation of academic courses and professional training programs on diversity (Gherardi, 2006). However, there are concerns that a US-centric approach may not hold well for diversity management in other national contexts (Jones, Pringle, & Shepherd, 2000; Syed, 2008). Contemporary scholars including feminists (Narayan, 1997; Spivak, 1990), post-colonial scholars (Prasad, 2003; Sunderland & Kitetu, 2000), and organizational scholars (Cal'as & Smircich, 1992; Jaya,

2001) have increasingly argued in favor of bringing to Western scholarship perspectives that are rooted in non-Western philosophies. For example, in his study of the pedagogical challenges of teaching diversity, Sharma (2006) notes that the inclusion of diversity in the curriculum offers a multitude of opportunities as well as challenges to academics and practitioners: questioning Eurocentric knowledge, deconstructing marginality, and engaging in intercultural dialogues in a globalizing world. Indeed, an important challenge when teaching diversity is to acknowledge the contestations of racialized and cultural difference and the pedagogic difficulties of encountering otherness outside of domination. Scholars have expressed similar concerns regarding the kind of knowledge that is produced and transmitted via the Western model of education. Jaya (2001), for example, notes that Western education tends to reinforce the dominant discourse of an ideology that is Eurocentric, that defines not only epistemologies but also the socio-economic and political spheres (Escobar, 1995; Said, 1993; Steady, 2002). In particular, there is a fundamental paradox in the production and international dissemination of knowledge in the context of diversity management. In writing this essay, I am motivated by the notion that as instructors of diversity and equal opportunity we should all be alert to the epistemological deficiencies and inconsistencies that we may be perpetuating through our use of mainstream course syllabuses, academic programs, and international editions of management texts.

## **GLOBAL EDUCATION INDUSTRY, LOCAL CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES**

There is a growing awareness among researchers and academics that many of the management concepts and academic programs that have proved effective in the

industrialized countries of the West are less effective in non-Western contexts. Dayal (2002) argues that the need for adaptation is greater in those fields of education that directly concern people, such as social sciences and human resource management (HRM). The reactions of individuals to work and relationships are in large measure guided by the attitudes, perceptions and values prevalent in a society. Dayal recommends that management education programs in India, as well as in other geographical contexts, must consider testing foreign theories and practices in terms of their relevance to the local socio-cultural and psychological milieu, and that there must be an ongoing interaction with local work organizations to better understand and develop both the meaning and application of classroom teaching.

Based on my own personal experience of teaching gender and diversity in universities in the West and also in a developing country, I have become increasingly sympathetic to the view that diversity education ought to be situated within a larger societal or institutional context, and that the content of academic programs ought to be clearly linked not only to management pedagogy but also to the local workplace. For example, take Welsh and Dehler's (2005) three-tiered approach to management education which emphasizes the societal, programmatic (i.e. university or college) and pedagogical aspects of education. Welsh and Dehler argue that in today's socio-cultural and economic climate, the complex, ambiguous, contradictory and uncertain nature of management can be more appropriately embraced as socio-political (Anthony, 1986) rather than technical-functionalist. The pedagogical challenge for diversity educators is to reflect the complexity of diversity management and the socio-political dimensions of

managerial practice in the content and delivery of diversity courses (Thompson & McGivern, 1996: 23).

I do, however, acknowledge that contextualizing diversity education and interlinking it to local socio-political dimensions is a daunting task particularly given the extant domination and commercialization of Western education on a global scale. We cannot underestimate the ubiquitous hegemony of Western management education which promotes the overlaying of capitalistic market logic to the conduct of business schools (Welsh & Dehler, 2005). The effect has been to reconstruct and transform the traditional teacher-student-curriculum triumvirate into one producer-consumer commodity. In the broader context, an industrial, profit-oriented logic in higher education has turned universities into 'purveyors of commodities within a knowledge supermarket' (Winter, 1999: 190). Similar concerns were expressed by Sturdy and Gabriel (2000), who drew upon their own personal experiences and perceptions of teaching an Executive MBA program in Malaysia as well as upon those of their students. Their study demonstrates the degree to which management education has become highly commodified and commercialized, with Western universities competing in emerging markets for lucrative local opportunities and foreign students or 'consumers'. Sturdy and Gabriel's study suggests that while there are parallels with the domestic consumption of MBAs, management education in non-Western countries such as Malaysia may generate added ambivalence among learners, an ambivalence founded on global-local and development-imperialism dynamics and tensions.

Indeed, such global-local tensions tend to be more profound in those contexts wherein cultural and political differences are rooted deep in history, i.e. in ex-colonial

countries and in Muslim majority countries. I argue that as diversity instructors we must be alert to the fact that the ways in which we usually conceptualize and teach diversity and equal opportunity in the West may be less relevant in non-Western contexts and, in some extreme cases, may prove counter-productive to the spirit of diversity.

### **What is Wrong with the Western Model of Diversity Education?**

As one who has moved into academia from a human resource practitioner background, it is my considered opinion that organizations are *per se* inadequate agents when it comes to managing diversity. I believe that the way an organization treats its diverse workers, including women and ethnic minorities, is to a large extent shaped by forces external to the organization, at the level of political economy, for example (i.e. political and legal aspects of economic policy-making). At this level one finds the interventions that shape societal, organizational and individual attitudes towards pluralism, inclusion, tolerance and social justice, reflected through various laws, media, politics, and economic policies. I also believe that confining diversity education to achieve certain strategic business objectives or to comply with certain legal requirements is tantamount to over-simplifying this complex and multifaceted subject. However, it is a fact that in the majority of American texts on HRM, most discussions about equal opportunity are built around various equal opportunity laws, such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and other anti-discrimination instruments. For example, Dessler in his 2003 text, which is widely used for teaching HRM in Pakistani universities, devotes the greater part of his chapter on equal opportunity to a discussion of anti-discrimination laws and court cases

in the US. Similarly, Anthony, Kacmar, and Perrewe's (2002) chapter on equal employment opportunity (EEO) deals primarily with the legal framework of EEO, the EEO Commission, and case law in the US. Approximately thirty-five pages of this particular chapter focus on the legal aspects of EEO, in sharp contrast to the three pages dealing with management guidelines. A better example may be De Cieri and Kramar's (2003) chapter on diversity, which offers a broader conceptualization of diversity management, albeit their text is somewhat limited in scope, i.e. human resource management in Australia.

The fact is that in most Western texts, descriptions of diversity management fall within the realm of formal organization. Focus is mainly upon value-in-diversity discourse, i.e. the business benefits case for managing diversity. For example, most case studies discussed by Harvey and Allard (2005) center on organizations such as Coca-Cola, Ford, and Tailhook, predominantly in a North American context. Syed and Özbilgin (2007) critique this practice of narrow conceptualization of equal opportunity and diversity within the domain of law and organizational policy. They argue that a realistic understanding of diversity and its management is hard to achieve unless issues of diversity and discrimination are tackled at three interrelated levels, i.e. the macro-national level, meso-organizational and micro-individual levels. This perspective is also supported by other scholars, who have highlighted the multi-level and multi-disciplinary nature of diversity. Skene and Eveline (2003), for example, argue that diversity should be taught as an interdisciplinary subject, drawing together elements of strategic management, organizational theory, anthropological debates on culture, and the insights of feminists and postcolonial theorists into race and gender, to name but some

of the elements of curricula addressing diversity. In the remainder of this essay, I will focus on the case of gender equality to exemplify the contextual challenges facing the Western paradigm of diversity education.

### **The Case of Gender and Equal Opportunity**

Despite certain significant differences from a legislated approach to employment equity, the conceptual framework of diversity management relies heavily on notions of equal opportunity and cultural diversity (Bruce, 2001). The principle of equal opportunity, i.e. of creating employment processes that ensure non-discrimination against race, color, sex, and several other attributes (Dessler, 2003: 52), is very much an integral part of diversity management. Equal opportunity or diversity frameworks in many organizations have objectives that are related to the creation of conditions wherein women and men are treated alike and do not take precedence over each other on the basis of gender (McDougall, 1996: 64).

The notion of similar treatment of women and men, however, is not without its problems. Sen (1992) argues that any pathway to equality will remain problematic unless it takes into account individual differences. Sen identifies two characteristics of human diversity: internal characteristics such as gender and age and external characteristics such as social background and wealth (p. 1). He argues that any discourse on equality that is based on the universal equality of human beings generally misses out on one major aspect, i.e. the fact that equal consideration for all may paradoxically result in less than equal treatment of the disadvantaged (p. xi). The characteristics of inequality in different spaces may diverge from each other because of

the uniquely multi-faceted differences in human beings. The pervasive nature of gender differences intensifies the need to address the diversity of focus, or internal plurality of focus, in the assessment of equality. If there were no inherent differences between men and women, a major cause of gender inequity would disappear (Sen, 1992: 3).

However it is a fact that in Western feminist thought, a critical perspective of gender is realized through 'equal opportunity discourse' in which the phrase 'equal opportunity' means equal treatment of women and men, not only linguistically but also in areas such as access to education and employment (Sunderland & Kitetu, 2000). This is not withstanding the fact that in some cultural contexts, such as in some parts of Asia and Africa, this form of discourse may be seen as non-legitimate or at best as peripheral discourse. Then again, other egalitarian discourses of gender can be applied – some of which may at times be both more appropriate and more productive than the 'equal opportunity discourse' (Sunderland, 1996). Sunderland and Kitetu (2000) note that in many non-Western cultures, any suggestion of changing gender roles in the direction of 'equal opportunities' tends to be associated with Western feminism, which is in turn associated with a perceived anti-men and anti-family bias and by extension seems anti-woman, anti-modest, and 'permissive' (e.g. the case of single teenage mothers) - something that many Africans and Asians are aware of and view with concern and disapproval.

The model of equal opportunity promoted by the majority of Western feminists implies a universal notion of oppressive patriarchy without adequately taking into account the nature of gender relations in various and 'other' socio-political contexts. Such a notion, involving as it does an essential binary of woman and man, portrays all

women as a n 'homogenous group', a label that surely deprives non-Western women of their historical and political agency (Mohanty, 1997). However, issues of women's disadvantage or oppression cannot be realistically understood without some understanding of their race, class, and historical backgrounds (Bunting, 1993). For example, a Kashmiri woman in Indian-controlled Kashmir and a Palestinian woman in the Gaza Strip are at greater risk of violence or oppression for reasons which are intertwined with, but not encapsulated by, gender. To ignore these interactions and to subsume their experiences solely within gender constructs tells at best a partial and biased story.

Bunting (1993) suggests that the majority of Western feminists do not consider the cultural specificity of rights discourse in their theorization of gender equality. Custom is seen as something that perpetuates the subordination of women to men (Howard, 1984). Culture is seen as an impediment to the realization of women's rights (Engle, 1992). Most feminists have defined themselves in opposition to religious perspectives of gender relations, choosing instead to produce a feminist critique of theology, at the same time blaming religious institutions for the continued oppression and disempowerment of women (see Winter, 2001). For example, when Western feminists protest the lack of civil rights of women 'under Islam', the tendency is to see the latter as inescapably oppressed by a sexist religion and culture (Bunting, 1993). Such an approach effectively silences Muslim women, robbing them of their agency to express their own identity. Further, it leaves unexamined and unanswered questions of the meaning (in terms other than fundamentalist) of Islam for women. "Any analysis of

change is therefore foreclosed" (Lazreg, 1990: 330). Obviously such a prescriptive approach is problematic in theorizing and implementing diversity and equal opportunity.

This bias is equally visible in studies relating to gender and education. Sunderland and Kitetu (2000) note that the majority of studies of gender and education has been undertaken in Western contexts. As a result, not only is more known about gender and education in Western settings than in non-Western but also the 'mainstream' paradigm and critical perspective of gender and disadvantage has precluded consideration of all other cultural paradigms and critical perspectives of gender and disadvantage which may operate. Sunderland and Kitetu's study demonstrates that education policies might need to take directions from other than an 'equal opportunity' framework vis-à-vis contexts that prioritize the importance of education for females but which view the idea of 'equality' as something other than promoting identical treatment for female and male students.

Similar studies conducted in other national contexts have pointed towards the inadequacy of the Western discourse on equal opportunity. For example, Syed (2008) demonstrates that the Western conceptualization of equal employment opportunity is of limited value in Islamic societies. In his quest to theorize gender empowerment and equal opportunity in Islamic societies, Syed stresses the gender division of labor that usually prevails in most Muslim majority countries, and which has been encouraged in the main (a) by an Islamic emphasis on the traditional family, and (b) by Qur'anic injunctions which hold men responsible to economically afford their wives and children (Hussain, 1987). On this basis, Syed argues, it is problematic to judge women's

empowerment and equal opportunity in Muslim countries based on their participation in formal employment.

## **THROUGH THE EYES OF THE *OTHER***

In the footsteps of Gravin (2007), I decided to interview diversity instructors in Pakistan, believing that it would enable me to explore the utility of the Western model of gender diversity education in that country.<sup>1</sup> I, like Gravin, endeavored to capture the 'wisdom of practice', and was encouraged by Shulman's (1987: 11-12) suggestion that the practical knowledge of teachers' represents an invaluable component of futuristic research. I will now present a brief snapshot of the insights offered by Pakistani diversity instructors in response to the following two interrelated questions: (1) Do you consult any Western textbooks to teach gender or diversity? (2) Based on your teaching experience, how do you rate the utility of Western textbooks for diversity education in Pakistan?'

I found that to varying degrees almost all of the diversity instructors consult Western texts along with other resources to teach gender and diversity. Human resource management is the main course (6 out of 10) within which most instructors discuss issues related to diversity management. However, to a lesser degree, diversity is also discussed in other courses, such as organizational behavior, strategic HRM, and

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<sup>1</sup> The qualitative insights offered in this section have been taken from a longitudinal study of diversity education in Pakistan. Participants were recruited for this study using this author's network of contacts within the Pakistani universities, snowball and criterion sampling. Snowball sampling facilitated the identification of instructors interviewed for this study. Criterion sampling (a) ensured that the participants included an even number of female and male instructors (4 female, 6 male), and (b) matched other specific criteria, such as teaching diversity as a 'standalone' course or as part of another course, (c) ensured that the institute in which they taught was recognized by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission. The latter criterion was deemed necessary for quality control purposes. In total, I interviewed 10 diversity instructors. The interview and analysis process was informed by an ongoing inductive approach towards identifying key themes (Boyatzis, 1998).

communication. Only two instructors taught diversity as a standalone course. This is in stark contrast to the usual practice in the US and other Western countries where diversity is usually taught as a standalone course (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2000).

Most instructors rely on Western textbooks on HRM (e.g. Anthony, Kacmar, & Perrewe, 2002; Dessler, 2003; De Cieri & Kramar, 2003) to teach basic concepts and definitions of diversity and equal opportunity. However, they endeavor to situate such concepts within the local context so as 'not to isolate their students from the society'. The following are extracts from interviews conducted in 2007:

We take the basic concepts from their [Western] literature and try to customize it more to our local needs... We don't use all Western literature. We don't isolate our students from their own society. We try to situate Western literature within our society (Female, 37).

I found that many instructors acknowledge and benefit from the various values set forth in Western literature. One value regarded highly by Pakistan's diversity instructors is 'tolerance'; something they attempt to integrate into their discussions of diversity in the classroom.

One of the main things that Western literature talks about is tolerance. That is one of the foremost lessons that I attempt to teach my students, i.e. tolerance of each other. I always try to take the literature of the West and adapt it in Pakistani culture (Female, 31).

However, the majority of diversity instructors as well as students seem to be uncomfortable with a Eurocentric description of diversity and equal opportunity. Concerns were expressed regarding the perceived subtle political strings attached to Western notions of gender empowerment and equal opportunity, e.g. their possible incompatibility with local cultural and Islamic values. At times, instructors suggested, these 'political strings' are counter-productive to classroom discussions on diversity.

I have generally found a broad agreement or impression among students that diversity is somehow something which is being forced upon them by the Western school of management. They believe that there are certain jobs which are not meant for women. No matter what argument one comes up with, they insist that not every job is meant for every gender especially in the current religio-socio-political environment in Pakistan. Generally I sense that whenever we discuss this issue there is entrenched resistance in the classroom (Female, 37).

The main problem is that diversity has become an issue subject to various political schools of thought. On one occasion I collected some material on women's rights published by the 'Aurat Foundation' [an *Aurat* (women's) welfare NGO in Pakistan], which I used in my classroom discussions. Unfortunately I found that there are certain strings attached to that particular school of thought. They not only believe in diversity but they are also leftist-leaning, secular, and a-religious. The problem is that when we use that kind of material for teaching in the classroom, then it becomes more than a diversity issue. The discussion is quickly diverted to political philosophy (Male, 32).

There are also concerns about the ways in which certain radical feminist ideas may clash with local cultural as well as Islamic values. It may be noted that Islam is the state religion of Pakistan permeating all aspects of everyday life including teaching.

Feminist theory... radical feminism is widely advocated in Western literature. But there are things in it which are not suited to Pakistan, for example their ideas about the institution of marriage, family, and men's and women's relationships (Female, 37).

In our society, religion is very dominant. We are Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Male, 52).

There are also concerns that Western literature has limited relevance to the local socio-economic and legal context. Obviously, the demographic attributes of the population discussed in American textbooks have little resemblance to the Pakistani population. Furthermore, some instructors find the US EEO laws and stockholder influence on company policy less than relevant vis-a-vis the ground reality in Pakistan.

They are mostly American books, American authors, mostly talking about blacks, Asians or Hispanics. Very few people in Pakistan or among my students have that kind of understanding of US demographics. They might have some knowledge of blacks but little knowledge about the issues Hispanics face in the US. So I don't find American textbooks of much use. I find that I can consult only a few books and they are usually about ethnic diversity in the US and also about gender but more focused on legislation. For example, a company will be sued if it does not comply with the EEO laws and the stockholders' influence. None of this is relevant in Pakistan, i.e. whether US stockholders and customers are aware if companies are promoting diversity or not, whether they are

offering maternity or paternity leave or not. This is not something I found students to be very comfortable with - that Pakistani stockholders or the Pakistani public can influence companies. That is not something that happens in Pakistan (Male, 32).

Especially laws of EEO are totally different in those [i.e. Western] books as compared to Pakistan (Female, 48).

Similarly, some instructors expressed discomfort with the static and unitary emphasis on gender in the American literature on equal opportunity. The view is that in Pakistan, women's employment opportunities are not only defined by their gender but also by other forms of identity, such as urban-rural background or ethnic identity.

In American books one finds issues like sexual harassment etc. but our local diversity issues are different. Gender empowerment is prominent in American literature, for example female representation and gender in management. My personal opinion is that there are also other issues of diversity, such as regional diversity and urban-rural divide, issues other than male and female that we need to discuss and are not being discussed (Male, 52).

I don't think Western literature [on diversity] is totally relevant. As far as concepts and definitions are concerned, those things are useful. However, practical relevance is an issue because there are so many different faces of diversity. For example, many students come from urban and rural areas. So, diversity in Pakistan is different (Female, 48).

A further related issue is the use of specific terms and jargon in Western literature, which are neither part of the Urdu language lexicon nor used in the Pakistani context. This requires considerable explanation by the instructor who may also be unfamiliar with the terminology.

The Western curriculum is too westernized. For example, in terms of jargon or terminology, such as specific Western references; these are difficult to understand taken out of context. It makes for a difficult situation that complicates the whole discussion. For example, I asked the students how they would describe 'stereotype' in Urdu. These terminologies are not applicable to the local context. We always have to come up with some definition, something word for word, and a lot of explanation is involved (Male, 31).

Many instructors expressed an urgent need for indigenous resources and research material, not only in the area of gender but also in other areas of diversity management.

I think those [Western texts] are standardized texts, not effective in our context. We need to have our own grasp of - or perspectives regarding - gender and cultural diversity. These are very serious issues and they are there in our society (Male, 52).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The diversity instructors' perspectives of the Western model of diversity education demonstrate that diversity as a field of education does not have a universally-shared meaning and must not be dissociated from the forces of space and time. Though

the instructors widely rely on Western textbooks to describe basic concepts of diversity and equal opportunity, and also benefit from its various values such as tolerance, there is a keen attention to the fact that in certain ways equal opportunity discourse is not consistent with local cultural and Islamic values in Pakistani society, such as an emphasis on exactly the same treatment of women and men, a unitary and static treatment of gender as a maker of oppression and subordination, and a radical feminist approach towards individual freedom. Clearly, the notion of gender equality and how it is to be realized must be situated within the specific historical, socio-political and economic contexts of each society. These observations are consistent with Sunderland and Kitetu's (2000) study of education and gender in Kenya, which suggests that teachers' actions are usually based on their knowledge of the societal norms and cultural backgrounds, and that the notion of gender differentiation may represent different meanings in different cultural contexts.

As a diversity scholar who believes in a contextual - not universal - model of education, I would suggest that the perspectives offered by the Pakistani instructors represent just the tip of the iceberg in terms of contextual concerns about a global discourse on diversity and gender and its dissemination through Western education. Furthermore, I argue (drawing on Jaya, 2001) that it is no small coincidence that much of the diversity and gender scholarship has been produced by academics who speak from certain locations, whether those who speak are women, people of color, or migrants. In other words, the dominant notion of gender equality in employment seems to conflate the experiences and perspectives of white Western middle-class women with the experiences and perspectives of women worldwide. Indeed, it is the uncritical use of

Western theories and education that more often than not stifles any incentive to seriously develop a realistic understanding of diversity and equal opportunity at macro-national, meso-organizational, and micro-individual levels within each society (Syed & Özbilgin, 2007). Therefore, instead of ignoring marginalized voices, something Roberts (2002) describes as 'expert suppression of contradiction', there is a need to view - at least once in a while - our conceptualization and pedagogy of diversity through the eyes of the *other*.

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