Comparing Polish and Iranian Women's Silence in a University Setting*

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Abstract

The silencing of women in academia is associated with a range of employment inequities. In societies where gender inequality is high women are more likely to experience a range of gender issues at work. This research note provides insights on a comparative study investigating women's silence in Poland and Iran. The study offers novel insight into the significance of the sociocultural and political context as a factor impacting the silence of academic women. By analysing two different countries in terms of politics, religion and culture we bring new insights into the implications of silence for women.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, Comparative Study, Women, Employee Silence, Gender In Academia
JEL Codes: I2, J7

Introduction

A brief examination of the literature on employee silence reveals that during the past two decades, quantitative studies have been conducted to evaluate and investigate the position of employee silence as an independent, dependent and mediating variable (Brinsfield, 2012; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2018; Hawass, 2016; Mao et al., 2019). Previous research in the field of employee silence identifies how much this organizational phenomenon depends on the context (Bormann & Rowold, 2016; Hall, 2017; Wynen et al., 2019). This previous research indicates that culture can affect the various dimensions of silence (Beamish, 2014; Huang et al., 2005). Previous studies have investigated the impact of gender, gender diversity, including gay and lesbian viewpoints, on the existence of silence in organizations (Bell et al., 2011; Fitzgerald, 2003). However, studies have not examined the intersection of employee silence in relation to gender and the sociocultural context. Nor have studies put a strong spotlight on the context of a country and its influence on silence in a cross-cultural setting. This is important, as culture and context maybe important explanations for why women remain silent.

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To highlight the influence of the sociocultural context we conducted a comparative study investigating women's silence in their roles as university academics in Poland and Iran. As such we make a contribution to the research literature in two important ways. Firstly, we examine women's silence in two completely different contexts, namely a country from the Eastern Bloc in Europe, Poland, and a country in the Middle East, Iran. These two countries are different in terms of politics, geographical location, religion and culture in general. Secondly, we examine the differences and similarities between academic women in Iran and Poland in respect to the context which surrounds women's silence, causes for women's silence and consequences of their silence in the organization. We now provide a brief literature review.

Literature review

Workplaces and organizations are gendered spaces. Power structures, power relations, discourses about work and policies and practices relating to work are highly gendered (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1998; Knights & Richards, 2003; West et al., 1987). These barriers include organizational cultures that offer poor flexibility for women with caring responsibilities (Acker, 2006; Knights & Richards, 2003); perceptions that women's skill levels are less than men's (Acker, 2006; Sojo et al., 2016) sex and gender harassment (Acker, 2006; Foley & Oxenbridge, 2020; Wright, 2016) and discrimination on a policy and practical level that prevents women's career advancement, promotion to leadership positions and other opportunities (Acker, 1990; Knights & Richards, 2003; Whittock, 2001). This causes women to face increased issues with wellbeing, a sense of belonging and acceptance in many workplace environments (Good, 2012). Women's choices when confronted with the gendered workplace are to voice any issues they have, remain silent about issues or leave their workplace and/or profession (Behtoui et al., 2017). Our analysis for this paper concerns issues around why women are silent, the influence of context and the consequences of silence. We now highlight how the context might influence women's silence.

A study by Adom et al. (2020) examined the silence of working women in Ghana, and found that due to the dominant masculine culture of the country, women who work in masculine workplaces were forced to remain silent in order to maintain their position. A study conducted in Turkey on female teachers, demonstrated that silence prevented women from reaching key educational positions (Inandi et al., 2017), which was the result of gender stereotypes, and the low perceived social status of women.

Using Bourdieu's game metaphor, Kalfa et al. (2018) investigated academic silence after the introduction of 'managerialist' performance appraisal system. They find that people either choose to play the game, that is seek to obtain high quality research publications and grants, or they stay silent, neglect the situation

and exit the organization. A recent study by Krishna and Soumyaja (2020) in India shows how the bullying atmosphere of the academic environment in India causes academic women to remain silent, and women use silence as a strategy to stay safe. Similarly, Aiston and Fo (2021) examined the position of women in senior academic management positions in three universities in China and Hong Kong, finding that traditional gender roles in society result in expectations that women will be 'subdued' and ultimately, remain silent. Aiston and Fo (2021, p. 7) use the theory of micro-inequities to show how small and unjust inequities aggregate and form a 'compounding causal role' in women silence. They also find how keeping silent helped women get ahead in their careers. Fernando and Prasad (2019) in the context of United Kingdom business schools, found that women who voiced their sexual harassment experiences were silenced by line managers, HR and colleagues, through persuasion, and women engaged in 'reluctant acqueisance' in response to this. Finally, we refer to the study of Maji and Dixit (2020) who examine silence, using self-silencing theory to explain self-silencing in the IT industry in India. This study demonstrates that in addition to cultural factors that lead to women's silence in the workplace, women themselves also show self-silencing behavior that leads to a lack of organizational growth. These researchers highlight how the prevailing collectivist culture in India promotes group consensus at work, which constructs women's silence as culturally valuable (Maji and Dixit 2020).

Fitzgerald (2003) states that management theories should be localized in terms of gender, culture, social and human structures, and if not, they do not take into account the range of contextual influences on women's silence. Zapata-Sepúlveda (2019) in the male-dominated context of Chile identified that there was silence and fear as a result of gender violence, which is normalized and taken for granted. However, they recommend that women should take shelter in 'resistant voices'. A more recent study by Pruit et al. (2021) find that in toxic male environments, status silencing occurs, where those in positions of power have voice, and those in subordinated positions, which are usually women are silenced.

Building on this previous research, in this research note we develop a theoretical explanation of women's silence across two international universities in Iran and Poland. We examine these organizations in their sociocultural and political contexts from a comparative perspective. In doing so, we seek to answer three important questions: What causes women to be silent in the organization? What influence does context have on this silence? And what are the outcomes of women's silence within organizations?

Method

To conduct this study a qualitative approach was chosen, because an in-depth perspective (Yin, 2018) was required to best answer the research questions. A grounded theory (GT) approach using in-depth interviews was further chosen as it allowed the researchers to gain detailed insights into women`s experiences with silence in organizations, the context for silence, which factors influence women's silence (Tlaiss, 2015), and the outcomes of silence.

One important aspect of GT is that it is context bound, meaning an emphasis is placed on how people behave, which is dependent on their context. Whilst there are some theories that can already explain women's silence in organizations, we choose GT, to give a new perspective on existing knowledge (Goulding, 2002). Most existing theories in women's silence are usually western based (Fitzgerald 2003), which makes it difficult to explain research results and phenomena in different cultures and contexts (Spigner 2016). As such, GT is useful to develop new theory on explaining women's silence in Iran and Poland.

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used in this research, where participants who were chosen to be part of this study were academic women from two universities, with one being in Poland, and the other in Iran, both of which are international universities. In the context of Poland, 22 people were interviewed, including 20 female and 2 male university professors as deviant cases, to determine if they were to say anything different from the women. In the Iranian context, the total number of interviewees was 20, where 15 were female and 5 were male. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved (Glaser, 1978), that is no new information is developed. In other words, after conducting the 22nd interview in Poland and the 20th interview in Iran, the researcher found that the comments made by participants was being repeated by the interviewees and the study had reached saturation.

Initially participants were identified by the university's websites and were contacted via email to ask for their participation in the research. Potential interviewees were sent information about the study, by way of an explanatory statement, and the interview protocol. Individuals were assured that no personal information would be included in research outputs to prevent them from being identified. Informed by the work of Glaser (1978), to analyse the transcripts open coding was first performed, where data was read line-by-line and words, sentences, or strings of sentences were given a code to reflect the meaning of the words or sentences. Then selective coding was performed where these codes were organized into higher order categories, which forms the basis of our findings below.

Findings

Contextual influences on Women's Silence

Poland

From the Polish perspective, we identified 70 general codes that were categorized into five concepts. For the Polish sample, the most coded concept (20 codes) identified is that of unsupportive policies towards women. For example, one participant stated that *"women have less rights in comparison to other European countries"*. If policies are unsupportive, then women will feel challenged to speak out, and hence remain silent. The second most coded concept was the "historical background of Poland" with 19 codes, for example *"gender is still an unresolved issue in Poland"*, which also meant that the structure of the university was also problematic for gender.

The next concept is "the university has a masculine culture" with 13 codes. The following quotes are indicative: *"It seems that the prestige of departments is established by having a strong masculine culture, and based on how many of the students are male means that field of study is valuable."*

Furthermore, participants identified that the university had a centralized and bureaucratic structure, and did not focus on inclusion or diversity, which had 13 codes under it. An indicative quote for this was: *"the university doesn't care about listening to diversity."*

Finally women often found themselves in a "destructive atmosphere in Poland" with 11 codes, for example participants stated that there are *"unethical relations between colleagues."* This meant the atmosphere, was not positive for women, rather it was problematic, creating a difficult context for women to speak out.

Iran

For Iran, some concepts were similar to the ones identified in the Poland context. For example, this included five concepts and these were named the "Laws of the scientific ministry" with 10 codes. Some examples include *"indirect employment laws lead to a generation gap between professors."* Similarly, "religious ideology" also had an impact, with 11 codes, for example *"religious beliefs suggests that women should play a particular role in society and the workplace."* The next concept is "national traditions" with 24 codes, which included comments such as *"Iran has a conservative culture"*. "Sub-cultures" was also an identified concept, including 8 codes *"talking about our life has lots of red lines, people don't trust each other to talk."* Finally, the final concept for the Iranian context, was "Gender policies" with 31 codes. It had included *"legal issues for women"*, and there were *"unequal rights in society for men and women"*.

Causes of Women's Silence

For the Polish sample, causes of women's silence within organization's involved 5 single concepts and 81 codes. This included "Fearing speaking out" with 14 codes; *"women feared that men would engage in retaliatory behavior if they spoke out"*, similarly "male authority at University" impacted on women's silence. There were 21 codes where *"women are a minority in hierarchy.*" It was identified that "socialization" was also an issue with 17 codes. Indicative quotes included *"what is the meaning of being girl in your society?"*, or women were "busy with dual life" with 9 codes, for example the "*time to raise kids"*, impacted on them, meaning that they often did not have a chance to speak out. The next concept identified was the "institutional setting" with 20 codes.

For the Iranian sample, causes included 6 concepts and 202 codes. The first concept identified is that of "learned helplessness" with 44 codes. For instance, one participant stated that *"women believe they have a disability"* by remaining silent. "Male authority" with 47 codes, was influential in the Iranian context, with one participant stating that "*women follow men`s decisions."* The next concept, was socialization with 36 codes. This is indicated in the following quotes: "*women are silent, because their socialization, training and education instils in them a silent nature"*. Similar to the Polish sample, those from Iran mentioned that the reason for women's silence is them being *"busy with dual life"* with 16 codes. Similar again to the Polish context, "institutional setting" was a well mentioned concept with 35 codes, where "*an older academic generation places pressure on women"*. Finally, one more concept was identified in the Iranian case, which was "modesty" which impacted on silence with 24 codes, as the following indicates: "*I prefer not to speak, because I like to be modest about what I do"*.

Consequences of Women's Silence

For the Polish sample, the consequences of women's silence had 8 concepts and 79 codes. These consequences included "organizational performance" with 9 codes, for example many participants commented that women's silence *"decreased organization performance"*. The next concept was "hierarchal issues" included 12 codes including "*traditional leadership"*. Other consequences included, "communication consequences" such as "*tension when communicating"* with 5 codes. Other consequences included a "perceived injustice" with 13 codes. For example, women's silence resulted in "an *inequality in top positions"*for women. Other consequences of women's silence include "scientific damage" with 8 codes, which meant that women's silence made it difficult for them to conduct collaborative research with their peers: "*disconnect knowledge sharing because half of the professional employee keep silent and don't share their knowledge in academic area."* Women's silence also caused "ethical

issues" with 5 codes. For example, one participant stated that "*the University doesn't care about sexual harassment*". Silence also had quite significant health influences, with some experiencing "mental and physical issues." (7 codes), for example one woman had a "*heart problem.*" The final concept, was silence's impact on "individual performance" (20 codes). For example, silence made "*it difficult for women to get ahead in their academic career*".

For the Iranian sample, consequences including 9 concepts and 181 codes. Similar to the Polish sample, "organizational performance" was said to be influenced by silence with 17 codes. For example, participants stated that there was an "*increase in management problems*". The next concept was the "prevalence of hegemony" with 41 codes. For example, participants stated that "*key positions were in the hands of certain men*" and the dominant males were out to "*eliminate women*", suggesting an unsupportive environment for women. Another major concpet identified by the Iranian participants, was that of "elite migration" with 10 codes. For example, one participant stated "*I am looking to leave Iran permanently, because I can't freely voice my opinions*". Women's silence also had an impact on "Mental health/Physical Damage" with 24 codes. For instance, women reported that there were an "*increase in errors.*" Furthermore, "scientific damage" with 11 codes included a "*block of knowledge sharing.*" Women's silence had an impact on "individual performance" which was coded 11 times. Indicative quotes included "*women don't develop their career.*" The final concept identified was "numbness" with 39 codes, with one woman stating "*I feel that I need to be passive and display no emotion*".

Discussion

Contextual influences on women's silence

Located in the Middle East, Iran is a non-Arabic speaking country governed by the laws of Islam. Unlike the Arabic-speaking countries in the region, the number of educated women has grown significantly, especially in the last decade, to the point where incoming students in 2020 were almost equal to men(Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2021). However, this equality does not transfer across to workforce participation in Iran, where there is only 19.23 % representation (World Bank, 2020a). This low representation not only contributes to women's silence in organizations it also perpetuates women's attrition and confinement to low ranking positions (Fitzgerald, 2003), thereby exacerbating male privilege (Aiston & Fo, 2021).

Poland is one of the Eastern European bloc countries that has been liberated from communist rule for more than three decades. Poland is in the neighborhood with one of the strongest economies in the world namely Germany, and Poland's participation in the European Union has changed the development and progress of this country, both economically and culturally. Our findings indicate

that women face silence in the academic space in Poland further accentuating the challenges women face gaining positions in leadership and high ranking positions.

The concepts extracted from the Iranian interviews clearly indicate that the university management complies in both policy and culture, to the larger socio-cultural influence of religion and government. As a result, the root causes of women's silence in the Iranian University stem from deeper cultural issues such as religion. In contrast, women in the Polish context are more influenced by issues in the structure of the university itself. According to the interviewees in Iran, the university's hierarchical system is designed based on a standardized masculine model, and gender differences are not respected by the overall majority. In this regard, we can compare the data on the number of women in the parliaments of the two countries, in which Poland is ranked 55th of 187 countries with 28.72 % women working in government and Iran ranked 176th with only 5.88 % women in government (The Global Economy, 2021), that is Poland has much better participation of women in government, than Iran. This highlights a gross under-representation of women in positions of power. In the context of Iran, the 5.88 % female parliamentarians often express viewpoints that align with the sociocultural norms of the government and religion and as such can contradict values that support equal rights and equality for women.

Causes

In regard to the causes of silence, both Iran and Poland indicated 4 common concepts: "male authority" (Poland 21, Iran 47); "the socialization of women" (Poland 17, Iran 36); "busy dual life" (Poland, Iran 16) and "institutional setting" (Poland 20, Iran 35). For Iranian participants these issues were more pronounced.

Although in both contexts (Poland and Iran) the issue of the masculinity in the workplace and the fact that women often are in the minority in the workplace was raised, which had unique impacts on women's silence. These findings should be borne in mind that according to the statistics, there is a total of 44.43 % women who are working in organizations in Poland (World Bank, 2020b). Meanwhile, the same statistic for Iranian women is one of the lowest ranked countries with only 19.23 % of women in the workforce (World Bank, 2020a), suggesting strong masculinity in the workplace environment in Iran, and a lack of underrepresentation of women. As a result, the degree and effect of masculinity in the Iranian workplace is much stronger. This signifies that women in Iran would be more likely to remain silent due to the context.

Consequences

In regard to the consequences of women's silence in the university environment, a number of concepts were common between Iran and Poland. One of the major findings was the impact of this silence on the performance of the organization, especially in the long run, as well as the impact of women's silence on their own individual performance, which was noted by both the Polish and Iranian interviewees, suggesting this is an issue relevant across cultures. In this situation, women's silence can have an impact on the performance of the organization, because women are prevented from contributing to decision-making and other organizational processes. Silence also effects individual performance. In terms of organizational consequences in the case of Poland, women's silence had an impact on "hierarchical issues" in the organization. For example, the number of men who settled top or prestigious positions within the organization had a lack of transparency in the hierarchy. However, in the case of Iran, the concept corresponds to a "prevalence of hegemony" with 41 codes. Hegemonic masculine cultures in society and within organizational contexts operate as mechanisms to legitimize practices among men that produce and reproduce gender inequality (Connell, 1987). In the context of academia in Poland and Iran, women's silence maintains the status quo of women's disadvantage and men's privilege and power in the organization (Bridges et al., 2021).

Suggestions for Future Research

The present study is a valuable study in terms of the dual context of addressing women's silence in the organization. We believe that extending this study to a variety of contexts, could greatly enhance our understanding of this silence. For example, future studies could examine women's silence in gender-egalitatarian countries such as Norway, Denmark or Finland, versus those countries that are not gender-egalitarian, such as those in the Arab world where strong religious beliefs place women in the home as mother and caretaker of the family, and not in the workplace. Other more moderate countries could also be examined to understand women's silence in those countries. Quantative studies across countries could also be conducted to examine these issues from an empirical perspective.

Implications

We offer a number of recommendations for organizations and universities in both Poland and Iran. Firstly, organizations could seek to implement affirmative action policies to better equalize the number of women working in the organization (Odaga, 2020). This is important, as both samples revealed that women experienced a male dominated organization structure. Secondly, organizations could develop better work-life balance policies, so that women with family can

be better supported in contributing to life and work spheres. Thirdly, organizations in Iran and Poland could support the introduction of women's groups and coalitions (Piderit & Ashford, 2003), so that women may support one another in developing strategies to reduce the negative effects of the male hierarchy, but also supporting one another in getting ahead. Finally, organizations could create forums and online feedback systems (Aiston & Fo, 2021) so that women may boldy voice their opinions and viewpoints. Implementing the above strategies would hopefully create a more gender-equal organization, where women are supported in their work and family lives, but also in voicing their concerns, knowledge and suggestions.

Conclusions

In comparing the results of the study, it can be said that women in Poland have a much better position, both in terms of the number of people employed at different organizational levels and in terms of the number of professors at the university. The University in Poland context has been run by a woman for two terms, and the number of women deputies and heads of departments available on that university website is well known. In comparison, during the 70 years of the existence of the Iranian university, there has never been a woman president of the university, even in the field of deputies, and as such we do not see the presence of women at all, which has severe implications for women's equality and subsequently silence. The present study was conducted simultaneously with the social movement of women in Poland in connection with a new restrictive law that removes the right of women to freely access abortion in Poland, which despite the special circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countless men and women took to the streets to oppose this new law. This reflects how much women are striving to keep their freedom and seeking their voice even at the state and governmental levels. But in the case of Iran, the women participating in the study, show frustration as there has been little improvement in the conditions for women in Iranian society and at work, which has led to women's silence. We implore organizations in all countries to implement the recommendations suggested in the paper, and others to improve the position of women in the workplace. Ultimately, this will lead to greater voice for women, contributing to better organizational performance.

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