Book Review:
The Three Paradoxes: Working Women in Singapore
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The book, The Three Paradoxes: Working Women in Singapore, is about the paradoxes faced by working women in Singapore. Singapore women have made a significant contribution to their families and the nation, as a result of increasing education and participation in the labour force. The success has its own price in terms of the paradoxes and dilemmas faced by the women. Women in Singapore face dilemmas at the national, societal and at the organisational levels.

At the national level, there have been mixed messages. Women are called to be productive both at work and at home. Due to a shortage of labour there are policies to encourage women to be " productive" at work and to have more children because of the declining birth rate.

At the societal level, women are expected to pursue modern career to earn money, contribute to the economy and family income, and to perform the traditional roles of wives and mothers to provide care to their families and stability to society.

At the organisational level, women managers and executives are still grossly underrepresented despite the rapid increase in women's education. Women managers are expected to demonstrate typical masculine traits in their jobs, at the same time maintaining their femininity. Women executives face psychological and corporate barriers. They encounter the proverbial " glass ceiling" .

In nine chapters, the book analyses how policy makers are facing challenges to utilize the talents of Singaporeans by maintaining certain family policies with respect to women. The book also provides perspectives in understanding the factors influencing women's behaviour in organisation and society, and suggestions to overcome these obstactles. Working women in Singapore in the past few decades have created a quiet revolution. The quiet revolution has changed the structure and order of the society. This challenged the gender based traditional division of labour between men and women.

Profound change in women's status has taken place in successive decades. The conferring of legal rights on women took place in the 1960s. Employment and educational opportunities were made available to them in the 1970s. The striving for equality began in the 1980s. Yet, the difficulties in achieving the goal of equality remain daunting.

The First Paradox

The first two chapters deal with the first paradox, which refers to the call to women to be economically productive while retaining their traditional roles in the family. Chapter 1 discusses the changing roles of women in Singapore by tracing women's increasing participation and contribution in the economy, as well as gaining higher education. It is often difficult for women to fulfil both economic and traditional roles. Chapter 2 discusses laws and policies related to women. A survey of laws and policies in the last three decades reveals the Singapore Government's interest in raising the legal status of women and encourage more women to enter workforce.

Factors contributing to the increase in women's labour force participation rate were, rapid

industrialization, economic growth, increase in women's education. Increase in educational opportunities and achievement expanded their employability and motivation at work.

Advances in technology led to more job availability for women in factories. Rising standard of living made it economically necessary for women to work and earn for the family. Economic progress, improved health care, rapid urbanisation led to significant demographic changes in Singapore, like delayed marriage, decline in birth rate, extended life expectancy, and delayed childbirth.

Despite Govt's various measures to attract women at work, various factors inhibit women's career development. Some of the societal circumstances that have limited women in their career pursuits are the new population policy, work-family conflict, child care, difficulty in finding a suitable marital partner, single-parent families and aging parents. In 1987 to arrest decline in fertility rate and number of productive workers, a new pro-natal population policy was announced encouraging couples to have three or more children. Work-related incentives for female civil servants were added.

Studies have reported that working wives have significantly higher level of burn-out than their husbands. Husband's burn-out is mainly work-related, whereas wives burn-out were both work and non-work related. Sex-role socialisation is the cause of burn-out among working wives, as they have to take care of family as culture demands.

In the last two decades number of divorces in Singapore quadrupled, of which 60% were petitioned by women. Single parenthood is increasing.

The authors have examined the social, economic, political and legal factors shaping employment patterns of women in Singapore.

A disparity between real demands and social ideals, which in turn pulls policies into conflict with each other, exists. Encouraging women to work and on the other, the fear that that society's structure may be threatened by displacement of women's traditional role at home poses the crux of the dilemma.

The authors surveyed the official policies and legislation related to women's roles and status. The Women's Charter as the only piece of legislation having direct impact on the women of Singapore, relates to marriage, divorce, maintenance, matrimonial property division, domestic violence, but does not advocate legal equality of women in workforce or confer protection against sexual discrimination in employment.

Singapore government's encouragement to women to join labour force came mainly in the form of policies rather than legislation. However policies relating to employment benefits have affirmed the traditional status of men as head of families.

Despite the policy of universal education, there is a sex imbalance in enrolment, for example access to technical and medical training.

Govt. tries to balance the nation's need to encourage female labour force participation with society's need to preserve women's roles of childbearing and child care. Some policies heighten the work-family conflicts that working women face. Policies encouraging women to have children have reinforced women's traditional role as wife and mother. All these conflicting messages form the first paradox.

Second Paradox

Over the years there has been an increase in the labour force participation of the females especially of married women. The number of dual-career couples is increasing because of increasing number of married women entering labour market. Some of the implications of working wives that have been identified include a better lifestyle for many couples, higher income dual career couple ensure financial security after retirement, married women play a critical role in meeting the demands of labour.

Chapters 2, 4 and 5 of the book deal with the second paradox, which refers to the conflicting demands of work and family. The second paradox focus on very real issue of work-family conflict, which arises from two sources, belief that housework and child care are women's work, and the inflexibility of most organisations.

Women working outside still continue to practice their traditional roles at home. Many women face dual pressure of family and work. Many choose to remain single or have family without children, while many other with higher educational qualification resign or take less challenging job to meet family's needs.

Unless the paradox created by work-family conflict is resolved women's work or family will suffer. Possible support system to reduce conflict is also explored. For example, child care arrangements in Singapore are discussed.

Given the demands of work and family faced by women, it is desirable to have more flexible workplace arrangement to enable women to fulfil both economic and domestic responsibilities.

Statistical data on demographic characteristics of dual-career couple and income are presented. A major problem faced by career-oriented women is incongruency between work and family roles, and between the roles of marital partners. The problems of dual-career families such as role overload, identity issues have been discussed, and suggestions are made towards possible coping methods and strategies like emotional support systems, physical support systems, and role redefinition.

Lack of spouse support, and the responsibility for childbearing, task characteristics, work schedule, role pressure are the important source of work-family conflict.

In order to cope with the conflict of work and family demands, besides individual support the support of the employer is also deemed important. Family-oriented policies and benefits should be present to attract and retain more women in the workforce. Companies formalising " family-friendly" policies and employer's willingness to reduce the work-family conflict will be a positive step benefiting the companies.

Comparison with other countries consistently shows that flexible work arrangement or part-time work can yield generally positive results. In Singapore a typical part-timer is likely to be a female, middle aged, married, with little or no educational qualification and a total household income of less than $1500 per month. The main reason to work part-time is to supplement family income. Often the female part time job seekers face discrimination.

Flexible work arrangements including flexi-time, part-time employment, telecommuting, job-sharing, shift work and 5 day work week are recommended as possible alternatives which can help balance family life and career.

Third Paradox

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 deal with the third paradox, about the barriers women face when they try to move ahead in career and the dilemmas women managers face at the organisational level. The percentage of women managers has not increased proportionate to women's educational attainment, and the authors blame the social gender stereotypes and other psychological barriers as responsible factors. Abscence of supportive corporate culture is seen as a greater barrier for women to progress in corporate ladder.

The third paradox juxtaposes the ideal of femininity against the managerial ideal. The social ideal of femininity should be modified to include such characteristics as intelligence, strength and balance.

In chapter 6 theoretical perspectives have been put forth to answer the question whether individual's sex, position or both determine a person's behaviour and traits in an organisation and the way she is treated. These perspectives contribute to an understanding of the factors influencing women's behaviour such as, women's traits and early socialisation, the

organisation's structure, the organisation's culture and the larger society in which the organisation operates.

In chapter 9, the authors also focus on problems faced by women entrepreneurs. Being in Asian society they may face discrimination, distrust and lack of acceptance. A profile of women entrepreneurs in Singapore has been presented along with suggestions of strategies or solutions to the problems or obstacles they face.

Singapore needs (besides a large workforce) a highly sophisticated and technologically educated workforce to support economic expansion. More women with technical qualifications may serve as a solution to Singapore's long term labour needs. This may lessen the reliance on foreign talents. This area has not been adequately pursued in this study. It would be worthwhile to examine the constraints as well as the enabling factors to ensure participation of women in the high-tech and knowledge-based industries.

Since research on women entrepreneurs is in its early stage, the authors recommended for future research on women entrepreneurs, working women and comparison of their experiences.

The authors suggested ways to improve the lives of working women in Singapore. The progress of working women is a result of combination of factors, including the support of Government, policy changes and achievement of women. The authors through examination of the paradoxes have been identified several areas for improvement, and motivation for actions to achieve changes.

The central argument of the book remains cogent: the dilemmas for the women are the products of the competing demands of a modern industrial economy and a society reluctant to forego its traditions. There is no easy way out of these paradoxes.

The reader of this book will have a thorough idea of the situation of working women in Singapore. The book is useful as there is no similar book addressing the issues of working women in Singapore, and the paradoxes they face.

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