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**Subtextual Gendering Processes:
A Study of Japanese Retail Firms
in Hong Kong**

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**SUBTEXTUAL GENDERING PROCESSES:
A STUDY OF JAPANESE RETAIL FIRMS IN HONG KONG**

ABSTRACT

This study examines equal opportunities for women employees in two Japanese-owned (Tairo and Okadaya) retail companies in Hong Kong. This paper initially discusses the various explanations for gender inequality put forward by scholars. Since the equal opportunity legislation – specifically Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) – was introduced in Hong Kong in 1996, little research can explain as to why gender inequality persists. The issue can alternatively be understood by examining the subtextual gendering processes. Concealed gendering processes (re)produce gender inequality based on hegemonic power, through structural, cultural, interaction and identity arrangements. Accounts of female staff at various hierarchies reveal that they are subject to these organizational and individual arrangements at various extent under the cover of SDO which was claimed to be implemented in the companies.

Key words: Subtextual gendering processes, equal opportunities, women, Japanese, retail, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong's economic success depends largely on an open society with fair competition. One of the elements contributing to fair competition is equal opportunities (EO). The concept of EO is defined as a commitment by an organization to be fair in dealing with all aspects of its employment practices. According to the Equal Opportunity Commission in Hong Kong (1997), the organization which implements EO does not permit discrimination of any kind against any person on the ground of gender, age, marital status, religion, ethnicity, and disability as these would impede the employee's ability to perform the job. As more women have received higher education and entered the labour market, one of the most important and enduring aspects in organizations is the issue of providing EO for both women and men. Research around the world shows that women are still treated unfairly in various employment practices, such as recruitment and selection processes, pay and promotion (Rubery, 1995), and training and development (Knoke & Ishio, 1998). Statistics and survey results in Hong Kong also show that women have not yet achieved EO at workplace. One of the indication of gender inequality is the median monthly employment earnings in which females was HK\$8,300 in 2003 while that for male was HK\$12,000 (Census & Statistics Department, 2004).

Since gender inequalities are detrimental to women inhibiting their access to occupations of higher prestige, power and incomes, it is significant to examine why gender inequalities persist in organizations from the perception and experiences of organizational actors – men and women. This study aims to:

- 1) investigate the EO perception and experiences of women at various hierarchical levels in organizations, and
- 2) analyze the subtextual gendering processes as to how organizational actors – men and women – produce interpretations and attribute meanings to gender relationships in organizations.

The main body of this discussion is divided into four sections following this introduction. The first section reviews various explanations put forward by existing literature and their limitations in explaining gender inequities. The second section discusses industry and company background, explains the research procedures and methodology especially on how the data is analyzed. The third section discusses the major research findings of

subtextual gendering processes at various hierarchies in relation to EO for women. The fourth section presents the discussion and limitations. Finally, implications and a short conclusion complete the paper.

EXPLANATIONS FOR GENDER INEQUALITIES

Scholars have put forward seven major sets of explanation for the phenomena of gender inequalities. They include education, attitudes, legislation, cultural values, inter-role conflict, power, and gender subtext. The first set of explanation concerns education and proficiency. Hong Kong's gender wage ratio improved sharply from 0.76 in 1990 to 0.85 in 1996 (Census & Statistics Department, 1997). Furthermore, Hong Kong's gender wage gap was smaller than the developed countries such as the USA, Canada, UK, Japan, Singapore, Norway and Sweden in 1996. Sung (2000) associated Hong Kong's small gender earnings differential with the rise of female educational attainment (as measured by years of schooling) which exceeded that of male since 1996. However, it cannot explain why the gender wage ratio deteriorated since 1996 from 0.85 to 0.80 in 2001 and 0.79 in 2003 (Census & Statistics Department, 2004) which was largely related to the economic recession after 1997. Furthermore, the classical approach had a view that it is a natural process for educated women to move up the corporate career ladder as it is a part of the 'pipeline' process (Tilly & Tilly, 1998). However, education and proficiency do not transform the process automatically. Women with qualifications still take a longer time than men to move up because it takes time to educate the top management (changing their social values) to accept women to senior levels.

The second set of explanation for gender segregation and inequality focuses on the assumed differences in attitudes, commitment and motivation between women and men toward work and domestic responsibilities. There were various opinions within this 'attitudinal' school of thought. Some scholars postulated that men and women who worked under comparable employment situations displayed different attitudes, commitment and motivation as a result of women's assumed domestic responsibilities (Loscocco, 1990). On the contrary, despite women's need to balance their dual responsibilities for family and work, research findings in Hong Kong showed that women displayed similar levels of commitment and motivation to their organizations as that of men, when they worked in a comparable employment situation (Ngo & Lau, 1998; Ngo & Tsang, 1998).

The third set of explanation relates to legislations. Some scholars argued that, in the West, even though EO legislations had been implemented in the areas of human resource practices for more than 30 years, the legislation was not a panacea as the disadvantaged position of women in employment still prevailed (Moon, 1991; Stablein & Geare, 1993). In Hong Kong, the former colonial government did not implement any EO legislation, until the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) in 1996, as it held a voluntaristic stance in employment issues (Ng *et. al.*, 1997). Several surveys indicated that the SDO had little impacts on human resource (HR) practices in Hong Kong, which remained gender-biased (Kwok & Lo, 1997; Smith, 1996). It was not a surprise that the EO law in Hong Kong had changed anything when it had a much shorter history compared to the EO laws in the West. The weaknesses of the bulk of the research on the impacts of the SDO were their focus on studying the individual level, e.g. individual commitment, rather than the organizational level, e.g. changes in institutional arrangements.

The fourth set of explanation concerns broader societal factor of cultural values. Traditional social norms associated men as breadwinners who should earn a 'breadwinner wage' which enabled them to support a family. Women were not considered as breadwinner and thus their wages were set below a family sustaining level (Kessler, 1990). Chow (1995) argued that Hong Kong women were subjected to sex role stereotypes related to the Chinese culture which prevented them from advancing into managerial positions. Chan (1997) showed that traditional Chinese value systems emphasized the sexual division of labour – women at home and men in the workplace, and discouraged women from acquiring the primary qualities required to succeed in the corporate world – aggressiveness and the will to succeed. Recent surveys also indicated that many Hong Kong Chinese still held traditional Chinese values and negative attitudes toward women as managers.

The fifth set of explanation concerns inter-role conflict. Studies of the division of domestic labour in Hong Kong showed that irrespective of their occupational status, women still bear the major burden of household chores and emotional labour (Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997).

The sixth set of explanation focuses on the consequences of power within organizations. Some researchers argued that out of men's fear of reducing pay and losing career prospect to women within organizations, men attempted to preserve privileged

positions for themselves. It was achieved either by confining women to a limited set of organizational positions, e.g. secretary, which were believed to be more compatible with the men's view of the female role (Collinson *et al.*, 1990; Yunker, 1990), or by unfair HR practices in recruitment and selection, job assignment, promotion, remuneration, and training and development (Wong, 1997). As a matter of fact, the power consequences were not only initiated by men, some women also tended to create, support and encourage discriminations at the workplace.

The seventh set of explanation – relatively understudied in Hong Kong – is the gender subtext which refers to the concealed organizational and individual arrangements that (re)produced gender distinctions underlying the dominant organizational practices typically emphasizing EO (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998a; Fraser, 1989; Smith, 1990). Organizational culture was gendered through ongoing, subtle, implicit and latent day-to-day organizational practices which facilitated the (re)production of gender inequalities (Gherardi, 1996; Wilson, 1996). The subtextual gendering processes approach built on the power based explanations, construing power both as a commodity that might be hoard, and more significantly as a cognitive hegemony, shaping unquestioned, common sense assumptions about everyday organizational realities. This research adopted the approach as an analytical tool since it could explain the underlying causes for gender inequalities.

The approach consisted of four power-based arrangements – structural, cultural, interaction, and identity – which systematically (re)produced gender inequalities. Arrangements were principles, measures and routines set to orchestrate organizational practices that (re)produced gender distinction as a side effect (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998b). These arrangements formed the basis from which research and interview questions were drafted, and the basis of data analysis.

The structural arrangements related to the design of work and allocation of personnel. The hierarchical segmentation of jobs led to vertical segregation as higher managerial positions fit the ascribed qualifications of men, and lower positions fit the ascribed qualifications of women. The horizontal segregation could be traced to the fact that some functional departments, e.g. HR Department, were labelled as women departments. Furthermore, training opportunities and institutional support were more available for men than women (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998b). Some interview questions related to this

arrangement include: What are the organizational practices in job design and personnel allocation? What are the criteria for recruitment and selection, pay and promotion, training and development for staff in various hierarchies and functional departments? What types of organizational support such as training are offered to staff at various hierarchies?

Cultural arrangements referred to the distinct aspects of organizational culture, pertaining to symbols, images, rules and values that explicitly and implicitly steered, justified and sometimes questioned gender distinctions in organizations. The arrangements were expressed in manifest expressions, underlying values and basic assumptions which helped organizational actors (men and women) to evaluate what was perceived as normal and what was not with regard to gender relations. Some interview questions related to this arrangement include: What are the organizational culture and norms for gender relations? What are staff expected to behave at different hierarchies? What do your company and your superior expect you to behave in your positions?

The interaction arrangements dealt with the social interaction of men and women, and the social processes pertaining to the way people dealt with each other. The general perception of men's role orientation was aggressive, having a will to succeed and work for long hours, and women's role orientation was emotional, sensitive, nurturing and willing to please others. The arrangements also dealt with the characteristics of men's and women's status (unspecific and specific), the way they dealt with sexual and non-sexual attraction, and the pattern of information that shaped interaction. Some interview questions related to this arrangement include: What are the appropriate role orientation for male and female employees? What are the status of jobs which are mainly occupied by men and women?

Identity arrangements concerned the identity of men and women in organizations, and the social processes pertaining to the way people identified themselves and others, including both gender and professional identities. People were identified and they identified themselves as men and women. To identify implied to accept and reproduce not only the physical and biological distinction between men and women, but also the implicit and explicit norms and rules connected with the assessment of masculinity and femininity in all its distinct forms. Many people behaved 'gender appropriate' and in doing so, they reinforced the gender subtext. Some interview questions related to this arrangement include: Do you think your

gender identity affect your career advancement opportunities? Which identity – gender or work – is more important to you?

To enhance the quality of analysis, the seven sets of explanation were also applied appropriately in addition to the four arrangements. The various explanations for gender inequality were not mutually exclusive but of simultaneous action and had interactive effects. For example, the traditional social norms seemed to be reinforced by the power consequences within organizations. It reinforced the concealed power-based organizational and individual arrangements. This explained why the EO legislation had little effects on gender equality. Before proceeding to the analysis, research methodology is discussed as follows.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Industry and Company Background

The paper focused on studying Hong Kong’s retail sector. The rationale for choosing this sector was due to its gender composition and occupational structure. Retail industry had traditionally been associated with large numbers of women who were employed in the non-managerial hierarchies where work was semi-skilled or unskilled, low paid, and segregated by gender (Broadbridge, 1997). Furthermore, women were not readily welcomed into managerial ranks in the retail industry (Lam, 1992). Therefore, occupational crowding in the retail sector could provide abundant data of typical gendering processes for investigation.

Two Japanese case companies – in pseudonyms of Tairo and Okadaya – were selected. They proclaimed that they had implemented the SDO. The results of Japanese companies could be generalized to women’s gender equality perception and experiences in Hong Kong because Japan had similar EO legislations as found in Hong Kong. Japan introduced Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1986, and revised the laws in 1997 (Bando, 2003; Bishop, 2002). The laws in both countries had similar characteristics as to prohibit discrimination against women during all stages of employment, from recruitment and hiring to retirement. The profile of the Japanese case companies is shown in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABNOUT HERE

Tairo was a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1985. The company had opened three store outlets in Hong Kong, and employed a total of 900 employees in Hong Kong by July 2000. Okadaya was also a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1986. It operated five store outlets in Hong Kong, employing 1,300 local employees. The company opened another new store in December 2000 after the case interviews.

Research Questions

Related to the research aims and based on the analytical framework adopted in the research, emerging research questions covered these two major areas. The first area related to EO: What are the official views of EO in the workplace? What are the EO perception and experiences for women at various hierarchical levels? What are the impacts of organizational practices on EO in the workplace? From the interviewee’s viewpoints, what are underlying processes undermining EO in the workplace? The second area related to the analytical framework: What are the views of management and individual staff regarding structural, cultural, identity and interaction arrangements? How do these arrangements affect the organizational practices? What are your experiences under the arrangements? These research questions formed the basis from which the research instrument was drafted.

Research Design and Data Collection

Since the research objectives focused on clarifying, understanding, and drawing distinctions between conceptual phenomena experienced in real world practices and were not concerned with causality, a qualitative approach was preferred over quantitative or mixed methods approaches (Creswell, 2003). Data were collected from people’s autobiographic accounts of their perception and experiences of EO, with the view that a person’s own account was most relevant for research because that account was a product of social domain. If this domain was analyzed in its specificity, the resultant interpretation would be valid without the support of statistical samples, i.e. without evidence that whole groups did the same thing (Holloway, 1997). Intensive case studies were used to contextualize the respondents’ accounts of organizational realities.

Interview guide was developed in English, and translated into Chinese and Japanese which were back translated to check for meaning equivalence. Since the interview agenda sought descriptions of sensitive topics of EO, interviewees were recruited through personal connections as the author had previous work experience in both case companies. This approach increased the likelihood of open and candid replies. The resulting sample consisted of a total of 7 males and 33 females – 2 respondents were Japanese, and 38 Hong Kong Chinese. The study of both male and female had enabled the study of gender as a relational concept. The respondents were diverse in terms of age, educational, hierarchical levels and functional departments. The median age was 30-35, the youngest respondent was under 20, and the oldest over 50. In terms of education, 18 had undergraduate degrees and 22 had no post-school qualifications. 5 of the interviewees were employed in directorate, 10 in managerial, 8 in supervisory, and 17 in frontline sales roles (of which 9 were employed on a part-time basis). They were employed in accounting, human resources, information technology, logistics, sales promotion, merchandising, customer services, and sales departments.

Among the 40 interviewees, 12 were close friends of the author for more than 10 years who acted as intimates. Intimates were used because they could be more frank to provide true feeling in the accounts of meanings, intentions, experiences and events (Dalton, 1959). The author was aware of the possibility of self-serving bias through expressing her own views after getting confirming accounts from the intimates with similar views. To ensure the interpretation of intimates' data was not unduly influenced by memories and recollections, measures were devised to guard against the self-confirming pitfall. First, two research assistants were employed to read transcripts and interpret data independently. Then, the author held several meetings with the research assistants. In the first meeting, the rationale as to why data were interpreted by each member was explained. Members were reminded to adopt open-mindedness to various interpretations, and leave room for alternative accounts. After the first meeting, members evaluated whether their interpretations were accurate or needed to be modified, and whether other members' interpretations were appropriate and could be incorporated. In the second meeting, various interpretations were either accepted and integrated or rejected, and members came to an agreement with each other about a unified set of interpretation from the data. Finally, after the write-up, the two research assistants were asked to read and comment on whether the data analysis was consistent with what had been discussed, and discrepancies were corrected accordingly.

All interviews were carried out outside the workplace in less formalized and more relaxed situations, such as in a cafe or a park. The interviewees' rigidity was largely reduced in these situations. While the respondents were being interviewed, a conscientious effort was made not to lead the discussion, but instead to encourage original responses. Each interview lasted more than one hour on average. The interviews were conducted by the author using the interviewees' native tongue. The interviews were generally 'conversational' in style.

Studies on labour process tradition had been criticized for neglecting the particular experiences of interviewees (Webster, 1996; McDowell, 1999). This research targeted at gathering in-depth information about interviewees' EO perception and experiences in the workplace, especially their attitudes, beliefs, understandings, and hidden voices (Field & Morse, 1985). The dialogue was tape-recorded and transcribed into written texts for analysis. On occasions, there were problems of background noise at the informal environment which made transcription difficult. In anticipation of this, the author transcribed all tapes immediately after the interviews so that the unclear parts of the tape recording could be supplemented by the author's fresh memory.

Data Analysis

Gender subtexts were drawn from the people's accounts to understand the dynamics between people, focusing on the relation between the speaker and those people they described, and its effects on what was said and unsaid. Clusters of meaning were developed, general essences were distilled, and essential relationships were apprehended (Polkinghorne, 1989; Creswell, 2003). Particular attention was paid to personal accounts, emotional experience, and life stories of women whose voice had been silenced and/or whose experience had not been counted as knowledge (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996; Harris *et al.*, 1995). Furthermore, the language and narratives that characterized organizational interactions were also noted.

Data analysis proceeded along two streams. The first stream sought to discovering categories of organizational practices at each hierarchical level in which gender distinction was perceived to be clearly visible and recognizable. In the light of the significance to explore the relations within and between categories, the second stream of analysis compared

the narrative patterns of the accounts by the structural, cultural, interaction, and identity arrangements constituting subtextual gendering processes.

SUBTEXTUAL GENDERING PROCESSES

The subtextual gendering processes were analyzed along these hierarchical levels – frontline sales, supervisory, middle managerial, and senior managerial grade. In this section, the subtextual gendering processes could be seen as ambiguous, and gender distinction was not straightforwardly positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant.

Frontline Sales Grade

Two major types of frontline sales staff – full-time and part-time – could be identified. Among these sales staff, the younger ones tended to be more career-minded, and the older and longer serving staff were less career-minded. Many career-minded staff held a pessimistic view about their career, as they felt trapped in the low-status jobs having low promotion rates, short ladders and low ceilings in job category. A sales woman who had been working for Okadaya for 7 years thought she could have moved up faster:

If I had planned a lot more I would have become a supervisor a lot sooner but that is with hindsight, looking back on what I know now. I joined the company with 8 women and 3 men in the sales team. A man and 2 women had already been promoted to supervisory grade, and 2 men had become section managers. The other 6 women joined at the same time with me are still working as sales staff.

Two types of structural arrangements operated in this juncture. First, sales work was designed to occupy the lowest hierarchy of organization. Second, sales staff were provided with the least amount of institutional support, e.g. career planning and training. As pointed out by the sales woman, most female frontline sales staff faced a sticky floor problem which kept them from getting their careers off the ground. More than 70 percent of sales interviewees said that they had no career movement beyond the initial entry job, and had difficulties to move up the organization. Another sales lady of Tairo aged 42 reiterated,

I have been working for this company for nearly 10 years since it opened in 1985. In between these years, I had resigned two times to have babies, and joined the company again. I am pleased that the managers let me change my work status from part-time to full-time, and gave me promotion from junior to senior grade when I was busy in bringing up my kids. Now my kids have grown up, and I think I should have a career. However, I feel I am trapped in the frontline jobs with no further career prospect.

Interaction and identity arrangements of traditional discriminatory attitudes about women's abilities also operated here which devalued the contribution women had made to an organization. As a result, the sales floor was organized with a strong gender division of labour. Furthermore, due to the influences of cultural arrangement, women's social status was generally regarded as low. It in turn perpetuated the interpretation that women's skills were inferior, therefore sales work which was mainly occupied by women was defined as unskilled.

The low possibility of upward mobility in organizations affected many sales staff's attitude toward work and personal feelings of achievement in two directions. First, most of the more career-minded ones changed to jobs in other occupations or industries for better prospects. Second, most of the less career-minded full-time staff chose to work part-time on a voluntary basis for its perceived benefits largely centred around women's need to combine work and family. The identity arrangement played an important part influencing the attitude and behaviour of these staff in terms of their self-image and perception of how others had on them. Since they tended to believe the traditional notion that women's place was at home, they placed less interest in a career. Interaction arrangement also operated here because women's unique relations within the family had made them undervalue their own labour power causing them not to resist the crowding effect.

The less career-minded women could not solve the sticky floor problem by resorting to voluntary part-time job. Part-time staff encountered more difficulties in career advancement than their full-time counterparts. A part-time staff of Tairo explained how managers disadvantageously deployed part-time staff:

There is a situation when vacancies come up in grades 4 and 5, it is usually advertised as full-time positions. Therefore, we (part-time staff) quite simply have to stay on to

grade 1 to 3, unless we can shift to full-time. It is annoying because I have 10 years experience, and somebody else with less than 2 years experience got the post just because she is full-time.

When asked why there were so many women pursuing part-time jobs, many male managers argued that it was a result of women's choice based on differences in orientation to work. A male manager of Household Department of Okadaya said,

I believe that women working on a part-time basis tend to give priority to their home, and are less committed to employment, less interested in training and promotion in comparison to full-time employees.

Another female manager of Tairo reiterated,

I think the employment outcomes are the result of choices made by women. If you are a career-minded person, you tend to be full-time anyway. Indeed, there are no managers employed on a part-time basis because working part-time means no commitment. Furthermore, even though a part-timer works hard, it is usually less visible to the management as their full-time counterparts.

Interaction and identity arrangements had affected organizational actors to have such belief. The perception that part-timers have no commitment effectively excluded a significant portion of them from even considering a promotion to higher hierarchy.

Many less career-minded female staff stayed in the sales roles for an average of more than 10 years, comprising a major portion of long-serving staff. They made up more than 20 per cent of the workforce in Tairo and more than 30 percent in Okadaya. Most of them aged over 40. Notably, managers gave them a high regard. A female HR manager of Okadaya referred them as constituting the bedrock of the organization:

Our long-serving female sales staff are our company's asset. We treasure them because of many reasons. First, they have built up a close relationship with our customers, and customer loyalty. Second, they help us to teach new staff – not only front-line staff, but also graduate trainees when they work on the sales floor. Third, they are sensitive, nurturing and are willing to share their experience with other staff

in both formal and informal occasions. Our (HR) department can just ask them to help and they are the most willing group to support us.

A Japanese manager of Tairo similarly explained,

Our best staff are not aggressive, but are happy to stay with the sales job. Women with kids are the ones that will do that, but a high-flyer will go and get a job somewhere else. Long-serving women provided valuable stability to our workforce.

Both men and women interviewees had a general perception of female role orientation as sensitive, nurturing and willing to help others. One plausible explanation was that organizational actors who had such preference were motivated by prejudice (interaction and identity arrangements) that was stronger than the desire to maximize profits by attracting the best people. By actively recruiting women whom they perceived to be loyal and not interested in promotion, the management could possibly capitalize gender divisions of labour.

Some full-time staff had changed into part-timers on an involuntary basis due to the economic pressure, e.g. competition and economic recession. The companies offered these staff insufficient organizational and personal supports (structural arrangements). Due to the nature of contingent employment, the companies allocated more resources to recruitment and line supervision, rather than training and development. Many involuntary part-timers were female returners after taken a break from work to take care of families. They were the first group to be laid off as their skills were outdated. These structural arrangements had further discouraged them from investing in training even though they were more in need of training after the work break. Interaction and identity arrangements caused a vicious cycle for the part-timers to break the unskilled and sticky floor traps.

Supervisory Grade

Supervisors faced a number of obstacles in career progression beyond the supervisory level. First, a structural arrangement of job rotation system applied to managerial grades that required relocation. Many female interviewees said that they were disadvantaged by the relocation requirement. A female supervisor of Okadaya said,

I always admire my best friend Lai Hung who joined the company with me as a junior sales clerk 6 years ago. She is smart and fast moving. However, ever since she has become a manager 2 year ago, she needs to rotate every 6 months, and has stationed in 4 offices already. I feel sorry for her because she needs to travel quite frequently to different parts of China. I feel that she is quite unhappy as she told me that she has much less time to see her children now.

The interviewee's change of perception of her friend's promotion was due to the identity arrangement that women should place priorities in family over work which often made them less mobile than men. Family priorities had made women less willing to take a position of frequent overseas travel or move geographically to a new site of employment (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). Furthermore, studies of dual earner households showed that women were more likely than men to have the location of their employment determined by their partner (Green *et al.*, 1999). This could also be explained by both interaction and identity arrangements that women were supposed to follow where their husband work.

Second, traditional attitudes and stereotypes about women's abilities also acted to limit their career prospects. Some supervisors felt that they were perceived by their superiors (both male and female) as either not interested in promotion or unsuited to managerial roles. Similar perceptions were also found in other studies of women in management (e.g. Green & Cassell, 1996). Identity arrangement was in place here as the professional image of women was undervalued. A supervisor of Okadaya felt that she had been labelled as a supervisor rather than as a potential manager and that her prospects for promotion were as a consequence limited:

I've got entrenched now in what I'm doing here . . . I think I'm perceived as a supervisor and I'm not likely to get any further here. Opportunities will come up, but I don't think they will be offered to me. Lately all vacant managerial positions have been filled by men.

Third, management's perception that supervisory work was unskilled (cultural arrangement) induced insufficient management training offered to supervisors (structural arrangement). Instead, supervisors had to pick up management skills on the job in the course of their everyday duties. However, to learn management skills required supervisors to change

their work mentality which was difficult to acquire on the job. A female manager of Household Department of Tairo who had been promoted from the frontline sales grade explained the predicament supervisors faced when they were promoted to managerial grade:

The management has a general concept that senior managers are involved in financial management and strategic planning, whereas supervisors focus overwhelmingly on day-to-day staffing and operational management issues. To become a manager, one has to work more on a strategic level. I came from a grass-root level and was promoted from the frontline role. I didn't have any formal management training, especially in conceptual and computer skills, in my former education as I only graduated from junior high school. I remember it was a struggle for me during the transitional period when I was promoted to a manager. I had to change my work mentality with little company support. Before I was a manager, I used to only input sales figures in computer to compile simple sales reports. After promoted to managerial grade, I have to perform various complicated computer work such as sales forecasts and sales planning which require me to upgrade my education before I can perform such tasks. I took evening courses to learn computers and financial management. Very few people can share their experience with me as well because most managers are recruited directly from degree level who have formal management training.

A male manager of Okadaya reiterated,

I have seen many supervisors who are stuck in the grade because they cannot change their work mentality and adapt to the management tasks. They have tried to learn the management skills, but due to either limited ability or lack of motivation to learn, they cannot change their work mentality. They find it difficult to learn higher level conceptual management skills as their education level is not high enough to comprehend the skills. They seem not to care to stay in the same grade at all, seeing some of their more capable colleagues moving up the career ladder, because they have many friends who are also stuck in the same way as them.

The required mental adaptation (a structural arrangement) had created a considerable role gap between supervisors and managers, making it difficult for supervisors to progress into management roles.

Fourth, the challenge of combining family and career was another barrier. It had been widely observed that career success depended largely on a particular relationship between home and work that advantaged single women with no family commitments. Women's career paths tended to be disrupted as a consequence of their domestic and childcare responsibilities. As organizational supports in childcare (structural arrangements) were lacking, many supervisors who had family responsibilities said that they had difficulty to break the glass ceiling of the supervisory level. Since moving upward to managerial positions was one of the conventional measures of career success, the various arrangements inhibiting female supervisors from promoting to managerial grade indirectly prevented them from career success.

Middle Managerial Grade

The middle female managers were subjected to a number of inequalities. First, they had a gendered career path. A majority of female manager interviewees said that they had limited opportunity for lateral mobility across different functions. A graduate trainee of Tairo said,

The management considers female trainees as more suitable to supervise the sales staff who are predominately women. Therefore, we [female trainees] are assigned to the Operation Department. However, the male trainees are assigned to the Merchandising Department. This has directly deprived us [female trainees] from the basic training of merchandising which is important for career development.

Horizontal sex segregation and occupational segregation were found in both companies where women managers were employed predominantly in functional departments which were regarded as traditionally suitable for women, e.g. fashion and personnel departments. Similar phenomenon was also found in other studies (e.g. Broadbridge, 1991; Fieldon *et al.*, 2001; Wong, 1997). This could be explained by the structural arrangement of gender division of labour. However, gender division of labour was not always recognized due to the mediating functions performed by the neutral and abstract structuring principles of organizations. When asked what were the recruitment and promotion criteria, managers said they were skills, knowledge, experience and qualifications. However, when probed who defined skills in their organizations, these managers said that the management did. Since skill

was a social construction which was non-neutral in reality, the definition of skill was gendered (Philips & Taylor, 1980; Bervoets & Frielink, 1988).

Second, female middle managers were required to have an undivided commitment to work – a cultural arrangement. Almost all interviewees (both men and women) said that to become a successful manager, one had to be dedicated to his/her work. Two types of commitment could be classified. The first type was long working hours which constituted presenteeism (the tendency to stay at work beyond the time needed for effective performance of the job) to demonstrate visible commitment. Crucially, many female manager interviewees said that they needed to work for long hours because they believed that if they did not do so, they would not survive. Competitive presenteeism had developed during the economic downturn which further favoured men than women managers. A female HR manager of Tairo recounted that men were favoured over women in recruitment:

I once conducted a recruitment interview for the position of assistant manager in the Fresh Food Department. The boss – a male Japanese senior manager – was about to make a decision of employing a female applicant. However, the female department manager suggested to her boss not to hire a woman because she insisted that women were not suitable for the position which required long working hours. Her rationale was that she had a former assistant female manager who used the excuses of pregnancy to avoid working overtime for handling a sudden urgent demand of sushi from the customers.

Another type of commitment the company expected from managers was preparedness to be geographically mobile. Since both companies had many retail outlets throughout Hong Kong, they required managers to work on a rotation basis at different store outlets. The Tuen Mun store manager of Okadaya said,

I have worked in almost all store outlets. I have worked for a store which took me more than four hours to travel. As a working mother, I feel guilty not to have much time to look after my children, especially my elder son who has just failed in his 'O level' examination.

The demand that women should show a manifest preference for work and commitment rather than family entailed a choice for women which men had been less explicitly obliged to make. The rhetoric legitimated the existence and persistence of glass ceiling limiting women to move up the career ladder. Structural arrangements were at work as the companies allocated human resources by job rotation which required relocation where men were in better position than women. These two types of commitment were gendered because they were associated with a competitive masculine culture. They also imposed disadvantages on women when attempting to meet the conflicting demands of work and family (Kanter, 1977).

Third, most female middle managers were confined to expertise-based roles as they carried only limited authority and responsibility, and were excluded from most power-based roles (cf. Coyle, 1995). A female section manager in the Fashion Department of Okadaya said:

I feel that I am regarded as an expert in my field of expertise. Often time when the management has queries in my field, e.g. when is the best time to hold a baby fair and what merchandises should be included in the fair, the Japanese managers come to me directly for ideas. However, I feel I am somewhat cut off from the management and other senior managers in the head office as I don't know what they expect us to do to help enhancing sales. Also I think the management does not like me to have direct contact with them. Once I had some ideas to increase sales profits through a special deal provided by the suppliers, I contacted the Japanese manager in my department to get a quick approval because the supplier would only offer such deal on a first come first serve basis. The Japanese manager told me to go through the proper channel by contacting my immediate supervisor disregarding the fact that our company would miss the deal.

Implicit and explicit expectations regarding self-image of women and men contributed to the gendering of organizational status. The expertise-based roles did little to bring female managers into the power and decision-making structures of organizations (Cohen and Huffman, 2003). Interaction arrangement played an important role here because expectations of behaviour depended not only on specific job-related status characteristics, e.g.

education, experience, knowledge, but also on diffused personal status characteristics such as gender.

Fourth, the perception of traditional social roles that men were regarded as the breadwinners and women were not formed another barrier for career progression of female managers. Some female managers claimed that they had been left out in pay rise and promotion. A female senior fashion buyer of Okadaya said,

I feel that the effort I put in the company is wasted. At the end of last year, my Japanese boss told me that my pay rise was postponed because of the economic recession. However, my male colleagues got the pay rise because they are considered as the major breadwinner.

Another assistant female accounting manager of Tairo who had worked for the company for more than 12 years reiterated,

I joined the company when it opened in 1987 as an accountant assisting my Japanese boss. As the company expanded quickly during the 1990s, a male accountant was recruited to share my workload. When the Japanese boss moved back to Tokyo last year, my male colleague was promoted to head the department although I am more senior than him, and have at least the same level of qualification and performance as him. I am very disappointed.

Both identity and cultural arrangements were playing a role here. Even though female managers felt they were unfairly treated, there was a dominant perception of no inequality between men and women in the organization. The dominance of such masculine discourse perpetuated the management to legitimize their decisions in pay rise and promotion based on gender rather than more objective criteria, e.g. performance, qualification, or seniority. The glass ceiling was (re)produced through the norms associated with masculinity which was assumed to be universal, and therefore genderless and invisible.

Last but not least, gendered informal networking (a structural arrangement) worked against female managers. A HR manager working at the head office of Tairo said,

Traditionally in retailing, opportunities to promotion and transfer to management positions are not usually advertised. Hiring through words of mouth, one of the informal recruitment and selection practices, still prevails. The HR department is just informed by the department that vacancies have been filled. Such practice favours men who are members of old-boy networks, from which women are excluded. I reckon that even though formal SDO procedures and standards are in place in the central head office, we in the head office seldom have the resolve or resources to monitor implementation at the local level.

Similar informal and subjective processes were also found in female managers' career progression in retailing in the West (Tomlinson *et al.*, 1997). These subtextual gendering processes prevented a majority of women managers from advancing their career further.

Senior Managerial Grade

A senior female manager was identified in Okadaya whereas none in Tairo. Women who broke into men's territories found themselves as 'tokens' – representatives of their category – rather than independent individuals (Kanter, 1977). After the implementation of SDO, Okadaya had promoted a woman to become a director in charge of all operational matters at the head office which was usually considered a man's job. A senior male manager said,

Our company is very fair because women have opportunities to be promoted to the top management position like our female director of operations.

Okadaya symbolized the female director as the living proof of EO. The management intended to create hegemonic power of a dominant perception of gender equalities among all employees. Most interviewees perceived that opportunities were equally available for all staff based on ability and performance. It was a cultural arrangement to marginalize the hidden aspects of gender inequalities. Nevertheless, it could not disguise the gendering processes as the female director said,

As a woman, sometimes I feel that I've advantages because I attract attention and enjoy rather high visibility in an all-male environment. The major reason why I can

get ahead is that the company wants me to be the role model for the other female staff. However, I've to work longer hours and twice as hard as men because I've to prove myself more than a man. I try to behave in the same manner as my male colleagues, sometimes even more male-like than they are. However, I don't feel it's right. After all, I don't know what good it does to me as a woman.

Identity arrangements had made the female director to behave more like a man than a woman. One of such identities was status which played an important part in the expectation of behaviour. The female director considered not only her status of working in a man's job, but also the perception among all other staff members of what she should do in the job. The images of acceptable behaviours for the female director belonged not really to women but to men, contributing to the gendering processes. Her feminine identity was, therefore, suppressed or marginalized at work. Instead, she identified herself with masculinity because she consented to the insufficiency of femininity which was associated with lower competence and capability. Moreover, in order to overcome her visibility and token status, she had to face additional pressures to perform, and paid a price of putting in extra work effort. On the contrary, the existence of tokens in Okadaya aggravated inequities (Kanter, 1977).

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATION

At a first glance, Okadaya appeared to have a stronger policy initiative in implementing the SDO as it had a female director at the top management level. It was attributed to Okadaya's intention to project a market leader image in the retail sector. However, the isolated female director had not changed prevailing views about the general unsuitability of women in senior positions. People constantly evaluated the female director by the male norms, and the female director herself also did not value female norms as adequate in management.

Evidence of unequal practices persisted under the disguise of implementation of SDO in the organizations. First, patterns of vertical job segregation could be recognized as there was a high proportion of women at the lower and middle levels expressing dissatisfaction with their career and promotion prospects. Although there was no overt hostility to women in the day-to-day behaviour, structural systems, e.g. job assignments, job rotation, job design, career planning, recruitment, performance appraisal, promotion and training practices,

worked better among men than women. For example, job design which distinguished management jobs from supervisory and sales jobs had a gendering effect. The supervisory and sales jobs were characterized by a routinized nature requiring little training. In contrast, managers were expected to work full-time, to be experts, flexible and willing to attend training and development.

Second, gendered culture was embedded in the organizational culture which defined tasks and behaviours specific to the organizational actors who worked within them. Organizational culture also presupposed a set of already hierarchically normed interactions based on sexual division of labour and gender expectations. It kept most women in their place, constraining and limiting women from having EO in the workplace. The firms upheld male characteristics and values as the cultural norm which in turn shaped gender relations at work. When the behaviour of female staff was judged against the masculine norms, women were perceived as inadequate, devalued and thus marginalized. Consequently, the gendering processes had made overt gender inequalities practised in a more subtle and complicated manner.

Third, autocratic management which was characterised by task orientation, competition, self-assertion and control was evidenced in the case firms reflecting masculinity and male cultural norms. Moreover, the informal recruitment through old-boy networks constituted another form of male cultural norms. These autocratic and masculine management style rendered EO policies great in spirit but lacking conviction in reality. Gendering processes increased men's influence in organizational decision-making, including organizational rules, procedures, formal job definitions, values and culture, reinforcing the structural arrangements. The subtle processes of organizational culture upheld male values and norms which perpetuated male managers to ensure female staff did not move into managerial positions in any great numbers. This allowed men to protect and further upheld male values and norms in the company, resulting in a persistence of gender inequalities.

Fourth, expectations of traditional male and female roles determined how men and women should behave in an appropriate manner. Since less career-minded women prioritized family over work, they voluntarily chose to work part-time. In addition to the increased cost pressure, competition, and sales technology, firms tended to use flexible employment system, e.g. part-time employment, further pushing more women into contingent employment. The

interaction arrangement of the traditional notion that women's place was at home had made women place less interest in career development. Therefore, women's unique relations within the family (an interaction arrangement) had made them undervalue their own labour power causing them not to resist the crowding effect.

Fifth, women managers had to behave more like men when they wanted to move up the career ladder. This identity arrangement was detrimental to female managers since it might cause work-family conflict. Furthermore, as the required skills in jobs predominantly occupied by women were considered unskilled, professional image of women was undervalued. This identity arrangement was detrimental to female sales and supervisory staff as they were stuck to the lower hierarchies.

In sum, structural arrangements, e.g. job and task design, were reinforced by organizational culture, sustained by interaction patterns, and was deep-rooted in the identities of organizational members. Although these processes perpetuated gender inequality, the concealed nature of gendering processes prevented gender inequality from being perceived as such. The four power-based arrangements (re)produced the perception of EO among organizational actors through their interpretation and experience of daily organizational practices within the gendered structure and culture.

There are several limitations to this study. The first limitation is the use of a large number of intimates from the case companies in which the author had work experience. Such limitation was overcome by measures of using research assistants to analyze data independently so as to prevent self-serving bias. The second limitation is that only large-sized companies were studied. Men working for larger-sized companies tend to hold more positive attitude toward EO because they are more likely to have experience to work with women in management positions. Conversely, small- and medium-sized firms may have less women-friendly work environment, e.g. they may have more difficulty in covering maternity leave. Therefore, women working in these firms may have different EO experience from those of large firms. The third limitation is that only Japanese companies were examined. Japanese management may be more conservative in treating capable female staff in terms of EO issues. Even though the EO legislations of Hong Kong and Japan do not differ too much from each other, the cross-cultural differences between Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese

may lead to different dynamics of gendering processes. Cultural and structural arrangements in Japanese-owned firms may differ from those of MNCs of other nationalities or local firms.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study advances the documentation of EO situation for women at various hierarchies in the retail organizations in Hong Kong by a relatively understudied approach – subtextual gendering processes. It is hoped that such empirical extension will increase opportunities for future research which can generalize results to different industrial sectors and firms of other nationalities and sizes.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study is crucially significant to strategic HRM, and has implications for several areas. First, a distinction should be made by HR practitioners between gender identity (i.e. a concept of himself or herself as male or female) and work identity (i.e. a person's concept of himself or herself as a manager or a member of an organization). The study has illuminated the fact that both men and women resist EO through various subtextual gendering processes disregarding their gender identity. It indicates that managers of both sexes demonstrate their work identity more than their gender identity. When the identity arrangements of women are examined, it reveals that different women identify themselves differently – some identify themselves as managers, whilst others identify themselves as female. For example, when the female manager of the Fresh Food Department refused to select a woman applicant as her assistant manager, she identified herself on the basis of work rather than gender. On the other hand, when the less career-minded sales staff resorted to part-time jobs voluntarily, they identified themselves based on gender as they prioritized family over work. This phenomenon was also found in other studies as women managers displayed a more competitive achievement style than non-managerially employed women (Handley-Isaksen and Leavitt, 1983). Furthermore, women may also identify themselves with different identities – gender or work – at different times. For example, when the female director of Okada tried to behave more like a man than a woman, she suppressed or marginalized gender identity but enlarged work identity. However, when she felt she was made a role model for other female staff, she identified herself based on gender. As a whole, it implies that different organizational actors have different perceptions of EO policies and practices, or the same organizational actors may have different perceptions of EO policies and practices at different times, depending on how the actors identify themselves with – gender or work.

Therefore, it is sceptical to implement EO policies that do not make such a distinction (Kanter, 1977; Marshall, 1984). It also means that an effective implementation of EO policies would be a complicated task requiring close coordination among all organizational actors at various hierarchical levels and functional departments.

Second, the study of subtextual gendering processes reveals that gender should be viewed as a practice and not a natural phenomenon, i.e. something organizations create and recreate in everyday work interactions and discourses rather than a natural attribute of people. As organizations produce goods and services, they also produce social beliefs about gender relationships and about their equity. Through the four arrangements, traditional social norms of gender distinction are reinforced by various organizational practices. Recognizing this can make management more aware of the hegemonic masculinity underlying the dominant discourse of gender equality under the disguise of practising EO policies. For example, it helps management to realize that regarding women who are less career-minded but willing to stay in the same sales jobs for years as the bedrock of the company may only capitalize gender division of labour rather than maximizing profits. Furthermore, since the social beliefs about gender relationships vary among women – the more career-minded ones demanded a faster career track, and less career-minded contended to stay in the same jobs for years, the management should implement EO policies according to specific situations.

Third, since implementing EO effectively requires close coordination among all organizational actors, companies should be prepared to face many obstacles such as cost pressure when adopting EO strategy. For example, to implement the SDO more thoroughly, companies should ideally assign specific personnel to undertake EO training for their staff, set up formal systems for monitoring EO, make particular efforts to recruit and retain women as managers, and so on. However, under the increasing cost pressure and competition, retailers may not be able to afford to do so because of the additional costs involved.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, organizations with a real intention to improve unequal situation for women should consider these. First, they should adopt a more realistic approach involving closer contacts with organizations which are seen as examples of good practice in the equality field. Second, they should set up a long-term EO agenda which seeks more substantial transformational changes, especially changes in organizational culture, values and norms so as to overcome any forms of resistance in EO. Third, they should

acknowledge the complex, gendered forces underlying current organizational norms in the process of changing organizational culture or re-engineering the work process. Without such an acknowledgment, efforts to disrupt the unequal structures are likely to fail.

This paper provides a critical and empirically-based evaluations of EO for women from the perspective of subtextual gendering processes. The data show that gender inequalities persist in companies. Statutory instruments such as SDO are merely on the books which apparently have little value without real changes to the core of everyday working arrangements. The gendered practices and outcomes remain hidden because there is active resistance for EO by both men and women. Since gender inequalities imply under-utilization of women, retailers may risk losing best quality managers from the female pool if they continue to employ a male culture. Furthermore, organizational and technological changes within the retail industry have altered the nature of retail jobs. For example, at the store level, since customer-workforce interface has become essential to the business, feminine culture requiring soft people-oriented skills has become increasingly recognized by retail companies. Thus, improving the EO situation for women has become one of the most urgent tasks for retailers. In doing so, organizations should first and foremost recognize and acknowledge that subtextual gendering processes exist before they can embark on a substantial transformational changes of the gendered organizational culture.

Table 1
The Profile of Case Companies (as of December 1999)

	Okadaya	Tairo
Year of Establishment	1986	1985
Year of First Store Opened	1987	1985
Length of Active Operation	13	14
Ownership	100% Japanese	100% Japanese
Number of stores	5	3
Number of employees	1,300	900

Source: compiled by the author based on the company reports.

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