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Gender Inequities after the Implementation of Equal Opportunities Legislation: A Study of Japanese Retail Firms in Hong Kong

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GENDER INEQUITIES AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES LEGISLATION: A STUDY OF JAPANESE RETAIL FIRMS IN HONG KONG

ABSTRACT

This study examines equal opportunities for women employees in two four retail companies in Hong Kong; two of the companies Japanese-owned (Tairo and Okadaya). Research conducted in Hong Kong shows that gender inequality persists in the workplace. This paper initially examines various explanations for gender inequality put forward by scholars. Since EO legislation – the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO) – was introduced in Hong Kong in 1996, little research has done to explain why gender inequality persists after SDO has been implemented. It can be understood though by examining the gendering processes experienced by individual employees. Concealed gendering processes (re)producing gender segregation and inequality based on hegemonic power, institutional, structural, interaction and identity arrangements are identified. Several gendering processes – ‘sticky floor’ and glass ceiling, token positions in top management, passive adherence to equal employment opportunities legislation, a dominant perception of gender equality, and gendered career paths – are identified in the case organisations.

Key words
Gender inequities, equal opportunities legislation, 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 organisation to be fair in dealing with all aspects of its employment practices. The organisation 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 not 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 organisations is the issue of providing EO between 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 and Ishio, 1998).

The EO situations for women in Hong Kong are reviewed by examining the secondary data from statistics and survey results including labour participation rate, baseline survey, sex segregation index, and wage differential between men and women. First, although women make up half of the population in Hong Kong, their labour participation rate is still low. The proportion of women in Hong Kong’s total workforce increased from 37.7 percent in 1991 to 39.2 percent in 1998 (Hong Kong Government, 1991; Hong Kong Government, 1998). Nevertheless, compared to the women’s labour participation rate in China of over 80 percent and 59 percent in the US, women’s labour participation rate in Hong Kong was relatively lower (SCMP, 1998).

Second, according to the baseline survey of equal opportunities based on gender in Hong Kong, many women in Hong Kong reported that they suffered from work difficulties related to EO. The three greatest difficulties in work situation in Hong Kong were gender-based differential pay and benefits, job opportunities, and work-family issues (Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

The third set of secondary data is the sex segregation which comprises sex segregation index and statistics of vertical segregation. The sex segregation index was 0.39 for 30
industries in 1998 (with 0 being complete sex integration and 1 being complete sex segregation). This indicates that men dominate the managerial and professional occupations, while women are segregated in lower-level jobs especially clerical and secretarial positions with lower wages, fewer promotion opportunities, less job security, and lower status.

In terms of the situation of vertical segregation, although women comprised 49.5 percent of Hong Kong's total workforce in 1991, women held only 20 percent (50,390) of the managerial positions (249,000) (Census and Statistics Department, 1999). Men outnumbered women four-to-one in managerial positions because women were still generally concentrated in lower-level jobs (Chow and Luk, 1996).

The fourth set of secondary data is wage differential between men and women. In 1999, the median monthly salary of women in Hong Kong was 27 percent lower than that of their male counterparts (Labour Department, 1999). Furthermore, studies show that male-dominated jobs (75 percent males) often receive pay better than female-dominated jobs (75 percent females) jobs.

As a whole, the above secondary data after 1996 show that gender inequalities persist after the implementation of the EO legislation since 1996 in Hong Kong. In addition, little empirical research has been conducted on the impacts of the EO legislation on gender inequalities in Hong Kong. This study, therefore, is to fill the research gap, and the purposes of this study are to:

- examine the EO situation for women in Hong Kong after the implementation of EO legislation, and

- investigate the factors contributing to persistence of gender inequality in organizations after the implementation of EO legislation.

In today's society, occupation largely determines an individual's social and economic status (Core, 1999). In this regard, gender inequalities is detrimental to women inhibiting their access to occupations of higher prestige, power and incomes. It is significant to examine the actual situation of and real agenda as to why gender inequalities persist in organisations after the implementation of EO legislation. The research will help
management and employees of both sexes to identify strategies in mediating problems with
gender inequities.

This paper is organised in four major sections. The first section reviews various
explanations put forward by existing literature and its limitations in explaining gender
inequities. The second section explains the research procedures and methodology used
especially on how the data is analysed by the gender processes approach. The third section
discusses the research findings in relation to the gender processes. The fourth section
concludes with the implications of gender inequalities for women in organisations in Hong
Kong.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have put forward four major sets of explanations – attitudinal, power-oriented, societal, and gendering processes – for the phenomena of gender segregation
and inequality. The first set of explanations concerns the assumed differences in attitudes,
commitment and motivation between women and men toward work and domestic
responsibilities. There are various opinions within this ‘attitudinal’ school of thought. Some scholars postulate that men and women who work under comparable employment
situations display different attitudes, commitment and motivation as a result of women’s
assumed domestic responsibilities (Loscocco, 1990). Research findings in Hong Kong show,
however, that women display levels of commitment and managerial motivation to their
organisations that are similar to those of men, when they work in a comparable employment
situation (Ngo and Lau, 1998; Ngo and Tsang, 1998; Ebrahimi, 1997, 1999). This has been
found to be the case, despite women’s need to balance their dual responsibilities for family
and work which may make them more likely to experience greater inter-role conflict than
men.

The second set of explanations for gender segregation and inequality focuses on the
consequences of power within organisations. Collinson et al. (1990) argue that within
organisations, there are two sources of power – management power over labour, and men’s
power over women. Men’s power over women is usually related to non job-related factors,
e.g. the stereotyping of women, confining women to a limited set of organisational positions
(e.g. secretary) which are believed to be more compatible with the men’s view of the female
role. According to this power-oriented argument, the main reason behind men's opposition to women performing similar jobs to them is men's fear that their own pay and career prospects will be reduced (Collinson et al., 1990; Yunker, 1990).

Research in Hong Kong has indeed suggested that various constraints are imposed on women as a result of men's organisational power over women and are manifest in unfair human resource management practices in the area of recruitment and selection, job assignment, promotion, remuneration, and training and development (Wong, 1997).

The third set of explanations concerns broader societal factors, including cultural values and legislation. Chow (1995) argues that Hong Kong women are subjected to sex role stereotypes related to the Chinese culture which prevents them from advancing into managerial positions. Chan (1997) shows how traditional Chinese value systems emphasise the sexual division of labour – women at home and men in the workplace – and discourage women from acquiring the primary qualities required to succeed in the corporate world. These include aggressiveness and the will to succeed. Recent surveys also indicate that many Hong Kong Chinese still hold such traditional Chinese values and negative attitudes toward women as managers (Ng, 1993).

Regarding legislation, some scholars argue that, in the West, the disadvantaged position of women in employment has long been tackled by EO legislation in the areas of human resource management policies and practices (Moon, 1991; Stablein and Geare, 1993; Moore and Devereaux Jenning, 1992; Dyer and Holder, 1988).

In Hong Kong, however, 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 have indicated that the SDO has have little impact on human resource management practices in Hong Kong, which remain gender-biased (Kwok and Lo, 1997; Smith, 1996). However, the bulk of the research on the impact of the SDO has focused on the individual level, such as individual commitment, and relatively little has examined changes in institutional arrangements, such as human resource management practices.

Some scholars have argued that legislation, even in the West, is not a panacea. For
example, Benschop and Doorewaard (1998) argue that despite a history of 20 years of EO policies and other attempts to eliminate gender discrimination in some European countries, systematic gender inequalities in organisations persist under the cover of proclaimed norms and values of gender equality.

The fourth set of explanations – relatively understudied – for gender inequities in the workplace concerns the underlying gendering processes leading to gender inequities. This may be termed as a ‘processes approach’. Some recent studies indicate that concealed and implicit gendering processes subtly and latently (re)produce gender distinctions (Fraser, 1989; Smith, 1990; Acker, 1992). Gendering may thus be inscribed in day-to-day organisational practices, which may facilitate the (re)production of gender segregation and inequality. Some researchers (for example, Gherardi, 1994; Wilson, 1996) have proposed a processes approach to analysing equal opportunities in organisations. The processes approach builds on the other perspectives, especially the power based explanations, while recognising their limitation. For example, the introduction of EO legislation, is seen as potentially as a cover which obscures rather than eliminates systematic gender inequalities.

Since the gendering processes approach has the advantages of being comprehensive by building on various explanations, including the power-based processes and various organisational arrangements – structural, cultural, interaction and identity – which systematically (re)produce gender inequalities, it is adopted in this study to bridge the research gap by explaining the main reasons behind the persistence of gender inequalities in Hong Kong after the implementation of the SDO.

**METHODODOLOGY**

This data for this study was obtained through a combination of indirect observation, interviews and written materials. The observation was mainly conducted in the back office before or after the interviews. When appointments were made for interviews, the author usually arrived at the workplace of the interviewees at least two hours earlier than the appointed time. Since the author had a long relationship with the company, the author was allowed to move around the back office to greet people the author knew. In this way, the information obtained from the previous interviews could be verified. In this way, the author
acted as an “indirect” observer since the presence of the author in the field was sporadic over a period of time and did not have actual participation in the company’s work. Therefore, the observations were operated by “moving in and out of the organisation to deal with other work . . . and in a nature of interrupted involvement” (Wax, 1983; Easterby-Smith et al., 1991).

In the observation, Perkins’s (1981) observation form to record phenomena of interest in situations of both formal meetings and casual observation (Table 1). The purpose of observations was to capture the routine and the typical in organisational practices, based on the assumption that the phenomena were not “purely historical” and that some behaviours and conditions in the field could be observed (Yin, 1989). The observed phenomena were used as pointers for some underlying patterns rather than the major source of evidence since the observation conducted by the researcher was limited in scale.

Insert Table 1 here

40 interviews from 10 senior line managers and 30 female staff respondents. 9 out of 10 senior line managers were all male, apart from 1 female executive director of Okadaya. The 30 female staff were interviewed. Semi-structured open response interviews were employed. Two sets of interview schedule were prepared – one for the senior line manager respondents (to describe the employment system including human resource management policies and practices used in the company, and explain the impact of the SDO on the workplace equality condition for women); and the other for the female respondents (to give their opinions on topics such as women’s positions in the company, career prospects and gender-related difficulties encountered at work). While the respondents were being interviewed, a conscientious effort was made by the researcher not to lead the discussion, but instead to encourage original responses. Each interview lasted almost one hour on average. Notes were taken in an unobtrusive manner because each respondent agreed to a request of tape-recording their dialogue. After the data were collected, the dialogue was transcribed into a written texts format for the purpose of analysis.

The paper focuses on studying Hong Kong’s retail sector. The rationale for choosing
this sector is due to its gender composition and occupational structure. Retail industry has traditionally been associated with large numbers of women who are employed in the non-managerial hierarchies where work is semi-skilled or unskilled, low paid, and segregated by gender (Broadbridge, 1997; Bluestone and Stevenson, 1981; Maguire, 1991). Furthermore, women are not readily welcomed into managerial ranks in the retail industry (Lam, 1992). Therefore, occupational crowding in the retail sector can provide abundant data of typical gendering processes for investigation.

Two Japanese retail companies – Tairo, Okadaya – are selected for the ethnographic studies during the period of late-1997 to mid-1999. Tairo is a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1985. It has opened a total of three store outlets in Hong Kong, and has expanded floor space for its flagship headquarters store in 1991. It employs a total of 1,000 full-time employees in 1998. Okadaya is also a wholly-owned Japanese department store established in 1986. By mid-1998, it operates six store outlets in the new town areas of Hong Kong, and employing 1,800 full-time local employees. It is the only Japanese department store which can expand after the Asian financial turmoil, and has opened two more new store outlets in 1998.

The primary data is analysed by the gendering processes, which include power-based processes and institutional arrangements, (re)producing systematically gender inequalities. In terms of the power-based processes, a specific theoretical view on power – not only based on manifest and latent power (such as violence, authority or manipulation), but also on hegemonic power processes – is required. Hegemonic power expresses the casualness with which many people in daily life wield power, or are subjected to power, without being fully aware of this form of influence (Doorewaard, 1989). The hegemonic power consists of concealed processes in meaning formation, and is expressed in common sense, identification, consensus and legitimising rationality (Clegg, 1979, 1989). These processes (re)produce consent or compliance with the dominant organisational discourse and the acceptance of day-to-day practices, in spite of the possible disadvantages of these practices for some persons involved (Brouns and Doorewaard, 1997).

The gendering processes are also analysed by incorporating four interrelated sets of institutional arrangements – structural, cultural, interaction and identity (Acker, 1992;
Benschop, 1996). The structural arrangements are concerned with the allocation of personnel such as career planning, hierarchical positions, and the ways in which jobs are composed and tasks and work processes are coordinated. They may result in inequality of educational opportunity (Marshall, 1984), gendering of career paths (Clarke, 1991), and insufficient institutional and personal support (Davidson and Cooper, 1992; Hirsh, 1990). The cultural arrangements are concerned with organisational culture which pertains to symbols, images, rules and values that explicitly and implicitly steer, justify and sometimes question gender distinction in organisations.

The interaction arrangements deal with the social interaction of men and women, especially their role orientation, i.e. task or social-emotional orientation (Forstyth, 1990), the characteristics of their status (unspecific or specific), the way they deal with sexual and non-sexual attraction, and the patterns of information that shape interaction. Finally, the identity arrangements are concerned with the identity of men and women in organisations. It is argued that when people identify themselves as men and women, they accept and reproduce not only 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 doing so, they reinforce the gender distinction.

GENDERING PROCESSES

Based on the primary data, five major gendering processes – 1) ‘sticky floor’ and ‘glass ceiling’, 2) token position of women in the top management, 3) passive adherence to equal opportunities legislation, 4) a dominant perception of gender equality existing in organisations, and 5) gendered practices of career planning – can be identified and categorised.

‘Sticky Floor’ and ‘Glass Ceiling’

The first set of gendering processes identified is related to the opportunities available for upward career progression – the ‘sticky floor’ and ‘glass ceiling’ – which respectively keep women from getting their careers off the ground, and breaking through into higher hierarchies, especially the senior managerial ranks (Morrison et al., 1992; Schwartz, 1989). The sticky floor is especially serious among female staff employed at lower hierarchies,
whereas the ‘glass ceiling’ is serious among female staff employed at the middle management level.

Since low level female staff, especially part-time sales staff, are not required to possess much skills, they more or less get stuck within the sales department, having little chance to move up not to mention the possibility of moving into managerial or professional work. Many part-time staff said that they have pessimistic view about their career. A female sales supervisor of Tairo said,

I have been working for this company for nearly 14 years since it opened in 1985. I manage to change my work status from part-time to full-time, and get promoted from a sales clerk to become a supervisor. However, I feel I am trapped in the general level working as a supervisor with no further career prospect.

It seems that the difficulty encountered by the lower level female staff to get their careers off the ground is related to their little interest in a career. However, when organisational arrangements are taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the ‘sticky floor’ is imposed on them. Firstly, gender identity plays one of the important parts influencing the attitude and behaviour of the lower level female staff in terms of their self-image and their perception of how others have on them. Since they tend to believe the traditional notion that ‘women’s place is at home’, they place less interest in a career.

Furthermore, the structural arrangements also discourage lower level female staff from investing in training. One of such structural arrangements is the gendered definitions of skill. Skills, however, are defined by men and male managers. Many senior male managers regard sales jobs as unskilled. There is an implicit gender connotation underlying the skills which connects high qualifications and masculinity for the managerial and professional posts which are dominated by male employees, and low qualifications and masculinity for the general sales posts which are dominated by female employees.

This gendered definitions of skills also leads to a gendered job structure design – another structural arrangement. In the job structure design, since managerial and professional tasks are regarded as ever-changing and complicated, managers and
professionals are expected to possess updated knowledge and skills. Therefore, it is considered necessary to provide managers and professionals, comprised mainly of men, with further training and development. In contrast, since female staff at the lower hierarchy perform supporting, routinised and standardised jobs, further training is considered unnecessary. Such structural arrangement of the job design offers women with little opportunity for training and improvement.

Many female managers indicated that they are hindered to move up the career ladder by 'glass ceilings' as a result of the lack of institutional support (such as training, development, mentoring, and career management) and personal support (such as a general lack of female managers as mentors). Instead, they have better chance for promotion when they stay where they are known and accepted, rather than attempting to start again elsewhere. However, when women identify themselves with and stay where they are known and accepted, they accept their role and status in the female-oriented jobs, (re)producing the gender distinction through identity and interaction arrangements.

Some female managers pointed out that they are left out in pay rise and promotion since they are not considered as the breadwinners. 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 [1997], my Japanese boss told me that my pay rise was postponed because of the Asian financial crisis. However, my male colleagues got the pay rise because they are the major breadwinner.

An assistant female accounting manager of Tairo who has been working for the company for more than 12 years said,

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 [1998], my male colleague was promoted to head the department although I have more senior than him,
and have at least the same level of qualification and performance as him. I am very disappointed.

These two examples show that the senior male managers tend to be influenced by a common sense – that “men as breadwinners whereas women are not” – to legitimise their decisions in giving priority of pay rise and promotion to men based on gender rather than on more objective criteria such as performance, qualification, or seniority.

As a whole, a dominant view of ‘sticky floor’ and ‘glass ceiling’ exists among the female staff in the two companies. They do not feel there is much improvement in EO situations after the implementation of the SDO.

**Token Position in Top Management**

After the implementation of the SDO, Okadaya has promoted a woman to become the executive director in charge of all operation matters at headquarters which is usually considered a man’s job. A senior male manager at headquarters said, “Our company is very fair because women have opportunities to be promoted to the top management position like the female executive director of operations”. Okadaya symbolises the female executive director as the living proof of gender equality. Both male and female staff perceive that opportunities are equally available for both male and female based on ability and performance.

Nevertheless, the female executive director does not feel comfortable with her work situation:

As a woman, sometimes I feel that I have 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 have to work longer hours than and twice as hard as men because I have 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 is right. After all, I don’t know what good it does to me as a woman.
To understand her predicament, it is important to examine how the gendering structure and culture are experienced and interpreted in daily organisational practices because the processes that bring the perception of equal treatment are producing as well as being produced by the identity arrangements. One of such identities is status which plays an important part in the expectation of behaviour. Status derives from specific job-related characteristics such as education, experience, knowledge, and personal characteristics (e.g. gender and ethnicity). Since expectations and behaviour are connected with the images people have about themselves and other members of the organisation, the female executive director has to consider not only her self-perception of working in a man's job, but also the perception among all other staff members of what she should do in the job. These implicit and explicit expectations regarding the behaviour of men and women contribute to the gendering processes. The expected behaviours of the female executive director are to highlight her expertise (specific status), and explicitly prove herself being capable because incapability is generally expected from the personal status as women. This implies that the images of acceptable behaviours for the female executive director belong not really to women but to men, which reproduce a gender division. Therefore, feminine gender identity at work is suppressed or marginalised. Women managers who want to move up the career ladder are required to learn male-type behaviour, exhibit a male gender identity, and compete on men's terms.

It also implies that cultural arrangements are in place in Okadaya in which paternalistic attitudes keep women in their place, except for the female director who can conform to the masculine culture, especially long working hours. Okadaya has a gendered organisational culture which can be explained by hegemonic power expressed in the identification of social practices in organisations determining dominant gender meanings. People tend to include masculine gender connotations in the criteria for determining good managers and for developing a career. The female director identifies herself with masculinity rather than femininity. She consents to the insufficiency of femininity which is considered to be associated with lower competence and capability, however, has to pay a price of putting in extra work effort.
Passive Adherence to Equal Opportunities Legislation

According to the senior male managers of both companies, they have modified the recruitment and selection practices, such as indicating sex preferences in recruitment advertisement and asking gender-related questions in selection interviews, so as to avoid prosecution for bridging the SDO, especially after legal actions were taken against some prominent recruitment advertisers. The Japanese human resource manager of Tairo said,

I heard from my friends of other Japanese department stores that we have to be cautious in abiding by the SDO. I do not believe it is necessary because the similar EEO legislation does not have much legal binding in Japan. However, since the situation here differs from Japan, I think I’d better follow my colleagues’ advice to adhere to the SDO so as to avoid any legal action.

It shows that the Japanese male manager adhere to the SDO passively which can be considered as artefacts (Schein, 1992). The artefacts are observable behaviours and processes only because the gendered attitudes of the manager has not been changed. This explains why the female staff do not feel there is much improvement in EO situations after the implementation of the SDO in terms of the sticky floor and glass ceiling persist in the company.

A Dominant Perception of Gender Equality

In contrast to the female staff, almost all senior male managers claimed that there is a dominant perception of gender equality within their company. A Japanese manager of Okadaya said,

We are trying our best to provide equal opportunity for women in all aspects of human resource practices. We think that sexual discrimination is not right, and we want every employee in the company feel they are treated equally and fair. We hope this equal culture can make all staff work more productively.

Under the legal binding of the SDO and the proclaimed adherence to the SDO,
Okadaya practises a gender neutrality in their human resource policies and practices. This means that the meaning pertaining to gender segregation and inequality is marginalised, i.e. gender is considered not relevant in the case companies, and the conception of gender segregation is 'organised out' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1963). This further disguises the concealed nature of the gender processes. This is one type of *hegemonic power* because the male management intends to create a dominant perception of gender equality among the employees.

However, the dominant perception of gender equality is in reality a cover of equality as a result of *cultural* arrangements in which dominant norms and values of the organisation reject the notion that gender inequality exists in their organisations. Since organisational members consider gender inequality is not right, they hold a dominant perception that their organisations should treat all equally. However, this may merely make management to give priority to an equal opportunity culture rather than recognising the unequal practices. Therefore, companies which give priority to an equal opportunity culture often end up with gender inequality because different positions in work and private life bring about unequal situations, i.e., identical treatment for all often impairs women (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998).

Furthermore, another reason why the male managers hold a dominant perception of gender equality can also be explained by the fact that the male managers legitimise rationality that steer meaning formation which is a form of *hegemonic power*. The male managers declare equality through explicit statements of equal treatment and opportunities for women which is regarded as a rationality. However, in this gendering process – especially those of meaning formation resulting in consent or compliance with the dominant perception of gender equality and in the acceptance of actual practices of gender inequality in spite of possible disadvantages for women, gender inequality is legitimised. In the gendering processes, men are accepted as the better employees than women employees, thus the practice of privileging men and marginalising women is accepted, which gave men having more power than women. This line of reasoning prevents unequal practices from being called into question.

As a whole, gender inequality is mainly found in the way organisational culture is organised around gender. Specifically, *structural* arrangement of job and task design is
reinforced by organisational culture, sustained by interaction pattern, and is deep-rooted in the identities of organisational members.

**Gendered Career Paths: Main Versus Side Lines Career Track**

The concept of career is a gendered construction. Evidence shows that the careers of women (both for women in general and women aspiring to be managers) have been characterised by limited opportunities, low pay, break of different lengths for childcare, and other domestic responsibilities. The traditional psychological contract, which is based on the assumptions that commitment, as evident in working long hours, is not compatible to women’s career. Furthermore, both men and women of both companies identified self-confidence, ambition, risk-taking, ruthlessness, and willing to work long hours as the major criteria which are gendered as they are masculine in nature. A majority of the female staff said that they have insufficient formal practices of career planning, and limited upward mobility to management positions (which is one of the conventional measures of career success). Therefore, they pursue a side line career track working for marginalised jobs which have low pay, poor promotion and training prospects, and being excluded from benefit entitlements, appraisal and development process (Piore and Doeringer, 1971; Syrett and Lammmiman, 1994; Swiss and Walker, 1993; Duffy and Pupo, 1992; Beechey and Perkins, 1987).

The low level female staff choose to work part-time for its perceived benefits, largely centred around women’s need to combine the need for compatibility between work demands and childcare requirements (Corti et al., 1994; Dex and Shaw, 1986). However, many male managers argue that childcare problem is an insufficient explanation for the extent of female part-time employment. Instead, they perceive that it as a result of women’s choice based on differences in orientation to work. Furthermore, men have a general perception 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 male employees. Since male managers also have a perception that senior positions require a full-time commitment to provide continuity and fulfil the responsibilities entailed, they consider part-timers not appropriate to hold senior positions for the lack of breadth of experience necessary for such positions.
The middle level female staff are also subjected to a gendered career path. A majority of female middle managers said that they have 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.

It shows that career paths are gendered vertically and horizontally. This gendering process can be explained by a structural arrangement: gender division of labour. Vertical sex segregation is found in all case companies which employ predominantly women in lower hierarchies, especially the sales and supervisory jobs. Horizontal sex segregation is found where women are employed predominantly in functional departments which are regarded as traditionally suitable for women such as fashion and personnel departments. However, the gender division of labour is not always recognised due to the mediating functions performed by the neutral and abstract structuring principles of organisations. It is found that functional demands are expressed in neutral terms of necessary skills, knowledge, experience and qualification which are supposed not to interfere with gender. However, in reality, the definition of skill is usually gendered because skill is a social construction which is non-neutral (Philips and Taylor, 1980; Bervoets and Frielink, 1988).

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

This article has reported the EO situation for women working in two Japanese retail companies – Tairo and Okadaya – in Hong Kong, and the major factors attributing to the persistence of gender inequality. The companies have tried to adhere to EO legislation, however, the implementation appears to be an outcome from a combination of processes and belief systems. As a whole, competent women who have already been in managerial positions can very rarely move further up to director level (the exception is the female executive director of Okadaya). Therefore, it can be said that Okadaya has a stronger policy initiative in implementing EO. It may be attributed to the fact that Okadaya expects
to have a better corporate image as it is one of the market leaders in the retail sector. However, when the work of this female executive director is closely examined, it shows that she is merely a show piece or a token symbolising the minority she belongs to, and is considered as a representative of that minority (Kanter, 1977).

To summarise, although there is no overt hostility to women in the day-to-day behaviour, the conservative manner towards SDO may have reinforced the gender inequality in Tairo and Okadaya. Secondly, the structural systems, such as job assignments, job design, career planning, clearly work better among men than women. Although Okadaya offers an open career path for the woman executive director to one of the top managerial positions, she is only a show piece or a token. Thirdly, since gendered culture is embedded in each company’s organisational culture, it keeps most women in their place, constraining and limiting women from having equal opportunities in the workplace.

This paper shows how employment is gendered by ethnographic studies of two Japanese retail firms in Hong Kong. As a result of the introduction of SDO, the top management puts forward a human resource management policy which is based on fairness and equal employment opportunities. However, the firms uphold male characteristics and values as the cultural norm which in turn shapes gender relations at work. When the behaviour of female staff is judged against this masculine norms, women are perceived as inadequate, devalued and thus marginalised. Consequently, notwithstanding the implementation of EO legislation, the gendering processes have made overt gender discrimination practised in a more subtle and complicated manner. This has increased men’s influence in organisational decision-making, including organisational rules, procedures, formal job definitions, values and culture, in which women are subjected to hegemonic power processes without being fully aware of them. Therefore, gender segregation and inequality are perpetuated disregarding the implementation of EO legislation. The concealed nature of gendering processes prevents gender segregation and inequality from being perceived as such.

To examine the impacts of SDO in Hong Kong, individuals’ experience of the outcomes of the legislation on a day-to-day basis should be identified, rather than assessing the impact of the legislation in terms of human resource management policies and practices in organisations. Gendering processes, especially its concealed nature, should be recognised.
Although the SDO has only been introduced for four years, this study finds that the perception of gender equality has been reinforced among the management in the case companies, taking attention away from the fact that gender segregation and inequality persists in the organisations. This helps to understand some of the reality of equal opportunities in Hong Kong.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a considerable divergence between espoused company policy, which is to eliminate sex discrimination by adhering to SDO, and organisational reality in which gender segregation and inequality still dominate. Retailing is still dominated by a traditional management style which is characterised by task orientation, competition, self-assertion and control, reflecting that masculinity and male cultural norms still persist in the retail sector in Hong Kong. The SDO appears to have little impact of changing the organisational culture and norms to any great degree. Rather, the subtle gendered processes of organisational culture uphold male values and norms which perpetuate male managers to ensure female staff do not move into managerial positions in any great numbers. This allows men to protect and further uphold male values and norms in the company, resulting in a persistence of gender segregation and inequality.

Equal opportunities is no longer just a social or moral issue, it should be recognised as a business-related issue as effective utilisation of employees is an important strategy in retail companies. Since gender segregation and inequality implies under-utilisation of women, it has implications that retailers may risk retaining best quality managers from the female pool if they continue to employ a male culture which resists equal opportunities. Furthermore, organisational 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, the female culture requiring ‘soft’ people-oriented skills has become increasingly recognised by retail companies. This in turn requires companies to transform their organisational culture and truly commit to EO. These organisational and technological changes within the retail industry raise another question for further research in terms of the implications of such changes for the equal opportunities for women in Hong Kong.
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