


Chapter 5

Gender Inequality in Work Organizations: What HRM Practices Mean for Gender Inequality

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author aims to present, through a review of literature, that the gender equality assumption of the human resource management (HRM) approach is not taken for granted. It seems there exist two sides of the same coin, one representing the HRM approach and the other representing the gendered approach to HRM practices. This chapter reviews HRM practices in work organizations as the potential facilitator of gender inequalities in organizations. In addition, the contentious function of HRM practices in maintaining gender inequalities within work organizations is reviewed. In spite of knowing the implication of HRM practices on being a gender-diverse organization, there remain few studies on the relationship between HRM practices and gender inequality in work organizations. Such research will add a different perspective to HRM practices and contribute to the awareness related to the gendered nature of organizations and their organizational practices.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and challenging business world, the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of employees are recognized as the most valuable intangible assets for the organizations. Having intellectual capital and retaining talent is crucial for responding to challenges, developing a competitive advantage, and having sustainable success. These sentences refer to the HRM approach for managing the human resources of the organization, and this approach takes its roots from the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm.

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According to RBV, internal sources of organizations are the sources of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991) that can be developed by creating valuable, rare, and inimitable organizational resources. Besides traditional sources of competitive advantage (i.e., natural resources, economies of scale, technology), human resources have a unique contribution to the achievement of organizational goals (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). The mentioned uniqueness emerges from the inimitability of human resources as it is difficult to duplicate people's KSAs. That explains why the organizations should capitalize on this strategic source of competition and profitability, and how the RBV promoted the development of strategic human resource management (SHRM) (Dunford, Snell, & Wright, 2001).

SHRM, as an approach, emphasizes the relationship between the strategy and human resources in pursuit of organizational goals. Then, the integration and alignment of organizational strategy and resources are the fundamental characteristics of SHRM (O'Riordan, 2017). Integration refers to the integration of HR strategy and practices with organizational strategies (i.e., vertical alignment or fit); and alignment refers to the alignment of the functioning of each HRM practice with other HRM practices to create an HR system (i.e., horizontal alignment or fit) (Delery, 1998). Properly shaped HRM practices within an HR system can provide organizations with a basis for sustainable competitive advantage and increased organizational performance. Although SHRM has emerged as the prominent way of managing people, more recent arguments point to the ineffectiveness of adhering solely to a singular approach due to the complex nature of the factors and forces (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Gannon, J., Roper, A., & Doherty, L., 2015).

Despite the fact that there is a number of different HRM approaches, including SHRM, recent research draws attention to the changing focus from HRM approaches towards HRM processes and practices. As an example, recently it was argued that "... HRM has largely become something that organizations do rather than an aspiration or a philosophy, and the term is generally in use as a way of describing the process of managing people" (Armstrong, 2016, p.10). HRM is defined by several authors as "an integrated set of planned and intended strategies, policies and practices for managing people in an organization" (Tinti, Venelli-Costa, Vieira, & Capelloza, 2017, p. 636). HRM function in the organization has the responsibility to align the organization's human resources with organizational strategies through its practices. HRM practices are defined as "the activities actually implemented and experienced by employees" (Tinti et al., 2017). Organizations select HRM practices to achieve specific outcomes. HRM produces its means, such as competency-based HRM practices and talent management for better utilizing human resources.

HRM practices should serve the greater well-being of human resources by providing them with greater personal and professional fulfillment. Moreover, HRM practices are supposed to operate as the lever of managing diversity in the organizational context (Evans, 2012). However, the reality is different from the HRM approach, and gender equality assumption is not part of the reality in terms of HRM practices. For Dickens (1998):

"The adoption of an HRM approach which emphasizes valuing and developing people in pursuit of organizational goals and which stresses the role of the individual and the importance of involvement opens way for arguments about valuing all people and valuing diversity- and enables the promotion of equality to be linked to achievement of business goals. But the assumption that the rise of HRM is 'good news' for women, has not been tested ... the gender equality assumption in the HRM model is part of the rhetoric rather than the reality" (Dickens, 1998, p.23).

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