"A Woman CEO? You'd Better Think Twice!": Exploring Career Challenges of Women CEOs

at Multinational Corporations in South Korea

A woman CEO at a large transportation multinational corporation (MNC) in South Korea (Korea, hereafter) heard a story from her non-Korean former CEO concerning his male Korean friends' reaction to her promotion. When he shared the news of her promotion to the first woman CEO at the MNC after him, his male Korean friends immediately responded: "A woman CEO? You'd better think twice!" He wondered why they reacted negatively, though they did not know her at all. His puzzled experience aptly captures the importance of the cultural context in Korea that MNCs' women CEOs face in their everyday lives. In this study, we explored how 15 women CEOs at MNCs in Korea have overcome career challenges that are largely generated from the cultural context where they struggle to balance between Western and Korean cultures.

Problem Statement

Global rankings on Korean women's status consistently show alarming results. Korea's gender gap ranked 118th out of 144 countries by global standards of economic participation, education, health, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2017). Among the 29 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries surveyed, Korea held the worst place to be a working woman in *The Economist*'s glass-ceiling index (2018), which combines data on higher education, labor-force participation, pay, child-care costs, maternity and paternity rights, business-school applications and representation in senior jobs. Why has Korea's remarkable economic success failed to translate into women's corresponding high status? A major reason why women's status is so low by global standards comes from the fact that only a few women take leadership positions in every corner of the society. The driving question, therefore, has motivated us to conduct research on women leaders in diverse contexts

in Korea from the conceptual lens of work-life balance, leadership development, career success, and cultural context (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Cho *et al.*, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2017). One of the common themes we found in previous research concerns only a few women represented as leaders due to national and organizational culture that constrains their career success.

While conducting interviews with three women leaders (one CEO and two Vice-Presidents) from MNCs in Korea (Cho *et al.*, 2017), we found the importance of contextual differences in the proportion of women to men as CEOs and differences in promotion that might have impacted their career success. For instance, a MNC in Korea had three women executives (60%) out of five executives total under a woman CEO's leadership. Approximately 10% of a total of 150 MNCs affiliated with the Korean CEO's Association of Multinational Corporations (KCMC) represent women CEOs. By contrast, in 500 Korean companies by income, women executives make up 2.7% of the total number of executives; in 31 large companies, there are only 4 women board members (1.6%) out of a total 245 members, and 27 companies did not have a single woman board member (Park and Sung, 2018). There are only eight (1.8%) women CEOs, three of them work in their family-owned companies (Choi, 2015), though a woman CEO of a large IT company has recently been added (Kim, 2017). The gap between the proportion and promotion of women leaders in Korean companies and MNCs in Korea, therefore, has motivated us to conduct research on women CEOs at MNCs in Korea.

We had difficulty in identifying the literature on experiences of women leaders at MNCs in Western and Korean contexts. Few studies (e.g., Shorland and Altman, 2011; Tzeng, 2006) explored challenges women leaders face in their careers compared to studies on the success of women leaders. In this context, the purpose of this study was to explore what critical factors have led to career success of women CEOs at MNCs in Korea. Particularly, we were interested in

career challenges they faced in the process of becoming CEOs in the workplace where Korean and Western cultures coexist.

Literature Review

We reviewed the three concepts represented in the literature on women in leadership in Korea including career success, Korean culture, and organizational culture. We present the three concepts as our conceptual lens through which the experiences of women CEO at MNCs in Korea can be explained by multifaceted factors from individual to organizational influences.

Career Success

The most trending topic in career research was career success (Akkermans & Kubarsh, 2017). As far as women's career is concerned, they face times when they have to walk away from their career aspirations (Fels, 2004). A reason surely is not that women lack ambition; instead, cultural and traditional norms regarding women's roles might hinder women being promoted in an organization (Fels, 2004; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Ellemers (2014) identified phenomena that prevent women's career development such as implicit bias against women and work-family issues. Ibarra *et al.* (2013) illustrated examples of women's disadvantages in the organization including a lack of role models for women in leadership positions, resources, and access to networks and mentors, and expected societal roles for women.

In spite of women's career challenges, a few women make progress in their careers. A few studies examined the characteristics of women executives who became CEOs in the U.S. (Hurley *et al.*, 2016) and Korea (Kim, 2015; Shin, 2015). For instance, by examining the factors influencing the attainment of a CEO position for women in the Standard and Poor's (SandP) 500 companies in the U.S., Hurley *et al.* (2016) found that women's increased number of years spent in education and with children have lowered the probability of becoming a CEO. Having vision

and leadership skills and playing multiple roles are not necessarily obtained through education; instead, education can be reinforced by job experience in multiple roles (Hurley *et al.*, 2016).

We identified studies on the career success of women leaders in Asia and Korea. Cho, Ghosh *et al.* (2017) show women leaders' current state of working conditions and the balance of personal and professional lives in 10 Asian countries. Cheung and Halpern (2010) found that women leaders in Asia often struggle to balance duties in the workplace and in the home. Kim (2015) found that having a mentor and training increased the possibility for a woman in Korea to achieve an executive-level career goal. Korean women who had a higher educational level and salary and a positive transition from family life to the workplace tended to achieve an executive-level career goal (Kim, 2015; Kim and Cha, 2014), while women managers who had higher income and positions faced more work-life conflicts (Shin, 2015).

When it comes to career development, research indicates the need to consider both internal and external factors. O'Neil *et al.* (2015) identified four essentials that contribute to women's career development, including self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity. Fels (2004) suggested that women set goals, plan for the future, pursue advantageous connections, and realize that it is never too late for career development. Wayne *et al.* (2007) indicated that family and organizational support along with the government's family-friendly policies promote women's career development.

Korean Culture

Korea shares East Asia's Confucian model of family, emphasizing a clearly defined gender divide or gender roles (Park and Cho, 1995; Raymo *et al.*, 2015). To aptly capture the gender divide that is prevalent in Korea, Kim (2013) coined the term *glass fence*, meaning that

women's domain is at home and men's domain is at work. The gender divide influenced by Confucianism has kept women from taking leadership roles in the society and workplace.

Korea's corporate culture is based on collectivism (Cho and Yoon, 2001; Lee and Lee, 2014) that promotes collectivist mindsets and practice and the military culture (Hemmert, 2012) that is based on the value of command and control, a sense of loyalty, and no tolerance of failure. As mandatory military service for men has existed in the past six decades in Korea, the influence of the military culture on Korean men's perceptions and work life has been significant (Kwon, 2000).

There is no doubt that Korea's collectivist culture combined with Confucianism and the military culture has contributed to Korea's unprecedented economic success (Hemmert, 2012). In organizations, employees are treated as family members and, in return, they are expected to be willing to sacrifice personal interests for the benefit of the organization, leading to remarkable economic success in Korea (Cho and Yoon, 2001; Lee and Lee, 2014).

However, the same Korean culture has led to a gendered workplace where women leaders face career challenges in their daily lives. From early years, women learn Confucian values to prepare for their role as a wife and a mother. Women's status is considered *token* because only a few women take up leadership positions in almost all sectors (Choi, 2015; Park, 2015). The gender gaps become large when women get married with children due to stereotypes of a working mom (e.g., less committed due to multiple roles) (Kee, 2008).

Organizational Culture

Research indicates that organizational culture and structure influence women leaders' career experiences (Chang, 2017), work-life conflicts (Shin, 2015), and leadership evaluations (Chin, 2016). An organizational culture of gender equality has a positive effect on women

leaders' participation at work (Chang, 2017). Organizational culture also influences women leaders' work-life balance; in collectivist organizational culture, women leaders face work-life conflict (Shin, 2015). Organizational structure, hierarchical or decentralized decision-making included, can affect leadership evaluations differently depending on gender; women CEOs are likely to receive disadvantaged evaluations of their leadership styles in hierarchical organizations due to gender stereotypes (Chin, 2016).

MNCs implement and evaluate a large number of diversity initiatives to improve workforce diversity and culture, work-life balance, training, and career development in different countries (Wentling and Palma-Rivas, 2000). In MNCs, DeLancey (2013) found that an organizational culture that encourages diversity and employee involvement is critical for the management of a successful and diverse workplace. However, only a few studies were conducted on women's careers in MNCs. Shortland (2015) found that career, family, and financial constraints often put women in MNCs into less favorable positions. Due to the lack of research on women CEOs in MNCs, we reviewed women expatriates in MNCs because the study findings indicate women CEO's experience in MNCs. Tzeng (2006), for instance, found that female expatriates (10 Caucasian and 11 Chinese women) had to deal with gender stereotyping when performing overseas assignments in western MNCs.

Communication between cultures in MNCs has been challenging due to a gap in cultural values and management styles (Tran and Tran, 2016). Women leaders at MNCs in Asia often feel the need to learn two (Western and Asian) cultures (Cheung and Halpern, 2010). MNCs in Korea are also situated in a unique context where Korean and Western cultures coexist (Min and Lee, 2016). As MNCs in Korea are being operated differently than Korean companies, their

gender composition and hierarchical status shape women's careers differently (Cho and Hahm, 2016).

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore how women leaders at MNCs in Korea have overcome career challenges they faced in the process of becoming CEOs. The two guiding questions for this study included: What career challenges have women leaders at MNCs faced to become CEOs? How have they overcome those career challenges?

To answer the two research questions, we used a "basic" (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p. 23) qualitative research design, the goal of which is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences. Qualitative data, with an emphasis on people's "lived experience," (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10) were collected by semi-structured interviews to capture the meanings participants place on events, processes, and structures of their lives.

Data Collection

In this study, we operationalized the definition of women CEOs at MNCs as the top leaders representing their MNCs in Korea. Women CEOs at MNCs can be given different titles such as country managers and heads or managing directors of Korean offices. However, their major role is to represent their Korean office and to play the major communication channel with their headquarters overseas.

To explore the critical factors that might have led to career success for women CEOs at MNCs in Korea, we conducted interviews with 15 women CEOs (see Table 1) in collaboration with a woman CEO whom we had previously interviewed. She played a liaison role in making contact with other women CEOs who were affiliated with the KCMC. To establish rapport, the

first author had an initial meeting with seven women CEOs in a KCMC meeting for women's

networking in December of 2016 before conducting all interviews the following summer.

<<<Insert Table 1 about here>>>

Fifteen women CEOs at MNCs worked in companies with diverse industries and sizes as

shown in Table 1. Eight women are married with children, three were single, two divorced, and

two widowed. Eight women CEOs worked for two to 21 years before becoming a CEO in the

same company. One-third of the women CEOs worked in pharmaceutical companies. The ratios

between male and female employees vary from at least 75%, 25% to 50%, and 50%.

We used purposeful and snowball sampling to interview the women CEOs to hear their

lived experiences. First, we interviewed the seven women that the first author had initially met,

and recruited more participants through a snowball approach by requesting them to help us make

contact with additional participants. We conducted semi-structured interviews with participants

using an interview protocol of 11 questions regarding career challenges, career development

strategies, and work culture. Sample questions include: What have been the most difficult

challenges in your career? How does your company culture differ from that of the headquarters?

Interviews took a total of 16.6 hours (1 hour or so on average), while transcription took 121.5

hours total. Twelve interview participants (80%) returned their transcript with feedback on

wording and misspelled words; seven participants (47%) provided their feedback (e.g., the

definition of women CEOs) on a draft manuscript.

Data Analysis

The analysis team of three researchers used *NVivo 11*, a qualitative data analysis software,

to analyze the interview data. The four-step coding process was applied to analyze the women

CEOs' narratives. In the first step, the team leader revised 14 categories and 46 administrative

codes used in the previous study (Cho *et al.*, 2017) into 29 administrative codes. In the second step, the team conducted a test coding of two randomly selected transcripts with the revised administrative codes. The purpose of this step was to check if there is anything to revise for the sake of reliability. Through test coding, the team ended up having 14 categories and 32 administrative codes. The team had subsequent meetings to check the *Kappa* value (intercoder agreement) in *NVivo 11* and discussed disagreements on multiple codes. In the third step, the team coded half of the total transcripts in pairs using the codes developed. When the first person of the pair coded a transcript, the second person reviewed the coding done. After completing half of the coding, the team leader checked overlapping and missing codes and added two administrative codes (career planning and mentees). All researchers discussed emergent themes that needed particular attention. In the final step, after coding the rest of the transcripts in pairs, the team leader finalized the 34 administrative codes (see Table 2). All researchers reviewed the final codes and reached consensus through discussion.

<<<Insert Table 2 about here>>>

Findings

To answer the two research questions on career challenges that women CEOs at MNCs faced and key success factors that contributed to overcome their career challenges, we identified emergent themes from data analysis of participants' narratives including: becoming a CEO, key success factors, MNC culture, career challenges, and career development strategies. For the sake of credibility, when necessary, we also added numbers in the parentheses.

Becoming a CEO

We identified common themes and threads in our participants' narratives on how women leaders at MNCs in Korea became CEOs including career paths, motivation to move, achievements, and leadership.

Career paths. Many of our participants stated that they had to work through a variety of jobs and positions to finally become a CEO in the organization. Figure 1 (below) shows a representative example of a woman CEO's career paths that she has taken over 27 years in the same MNC to become a CEO.

<<<Insert Figure 1 about here>>>

This woman CEO began her career in a transportation company in Korea but, due to the challenging work schedule, moved to a small transportation MNC that was soon merged to the current large transportation MNC through her alma mater's placement office, worked in a customer service front line, was promoted to a customer service manager and senior manager, moved to become a senior manager and managing director of ground operations, which is considered the core of the company, was promoted to be an HR executive overseeing the North Pacific region, and finally became Representative Director, the top position in the MNC in Korea. In her career paths, she has been recognized as the first woman managing director and the longest-serving woman CEO at transportation MNCs in Korea.

This woman CEO's career path gives a glimpse of how women leaders at MNCs in Korea have become CEOs through diverse job experiences (e.g., customer service, operations, HR), positions (e.g., front line, manager, senior manager, executive), regional leadership, and long tenure (27 years) in the same company. Other women CEOs have also delivered outstanding performance and earned good reputations through challenging tasks assigned. In the process, they developed diverse experiences and competencies that are required to become CEOs.

Table 3 shows common themes we discovered in the women CEOs' narratives on their career

paths.

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Motivation to move. We asked participants what motivated them to change their

jobs/companies before landing in the current company. Organizational culture (6) was the major

reason, followed by referrals by others (5) (e.g., those they know or search firms) and their

challenging attitudes (4). By organizational culture, they meant an *unfavorable atmosphere* in the

previous Korean companies that prevented them from career advancement, as a woman CEO

stated:

> When I was working in a Korean company, I saw that many capable women were
> transferred to insignificant jobs after getting married with children, so I realized that I
> would not have any future in the company.

> Organizational culture also meant a *positive atmosphere* in MNCs whose values and

philosophy were favorable to women, as a woman CEO stated:

> The current pharmaceutical MNC's size was just one-tenth of the large bio companies but
> I liked its family-like atmosphere and focus on cures for neglected diseases.

Achievements. When asked about their most significant achievements, both monetary

and non-monetary achievements were identified. By monetary achievements, nine participants

spoke of their contribution to their company's steady growth in profit, business turnaround, and

increase in market share. By non-monetary achievements, they meant their contribution to

organization development and business strategy. Eleven participants spoke of the transformation

of organizational culture and the development of organizations' vision and employees as their

important achievements. Four participants spoke of success in business strategies, including the

integration of the company brand and launching of local products as their major achievements.

Leadership. When asked about their leadership styles, twelve participants stated that they had soft leadership styles as being kind, caring, flexible, participatory, interactive, authentic, and empowering. In contrast, a few women CEOs stated that they were considered as a charismatic or performance-driven leader because they resolved issues at work caused by customers or the headquarters.

Key Success Factors

Key success factors that have contributed to the women CEOs' career success included personality attributes, on-the-job experience, and external factors. We also asked them to define their career success.

Personality attributes. All (15) participants spoke of personality attributes as their key success factors including being passionate, hardworking, challenging, persistent, and having positive attitudes. In addition to personality attributes, doing what they like (8) and abilities/competencies (8) (e.g., communication and analytical skills) also surfaced as success factors.

On-the-job experience. Six participants spoke of on-the-job experience in challenging tasks and jobs, particularly in marketing and sales, as crucial in their career, as one participant stated:

> I took a few MBA courses but soon found that those courses were not as useful as on-the-job experience that I have had. My experience in market research, marketing, and product management in the past years was extremely instrumental in becoming a CEO.

External factors. Family support (8), particularly a husband's support in raising children and respect for his wife's career, luck (6), and organizational support (especially, supervisor support) (5) were among the external factors. Under the influence of Confucian culture in Korea,

the women CEOs who received family support can commit themselves to work, as one

participant stated:

> When I had to travel to Asia for the first time, I was advised to ask for my family's permission. My parents-in-law were deeply concerned about my husband who would be left out. In a family meeting, my husband clearly stated that my travel would be a crucial opportunity for my career in the MNC and thus he would fully support it. Due to his unwavering support, my parents-in-law were speechless.

> **Defining success.** Most (12) participants defined career success subjectively as feeling

happy when they work, doing what they like, and completing challenging work. In contrast, two

participants spoke of their organization's recognition of their achievements, which is an

objective definition of success. Two participants stated that their definition of career success has

changed from objective (e.g., promotion) to subjective (e.g., leaving a legacy) as one woman

CEO stated:

> In my early career, I had a limited definition of career success. I wanted to get recognized and promoted. But my perspective of success has changed since I took leadership positions. Now I want to leave a legacy.

MNC Culture

We found that MNC culture has contributed to these women CEOs' career success. By

MNC culture, we mean shared values, organizational support, and compliance.

> **Shared values.** Many (10) women CEOs stated that their MNC's culture encouraged

open communication. Ten participants stated that their values were in line with their MNC's

values and philosophy (e.g., people first, diversity). Our participants stated that their MNC's

open culture was better represented by non-Korean top managers, as one woman CEO stated:

> In spite of the U.S. headquarters' recognition of my performance, Korean top managers did not accept it and tested my ability with less significant roles and titles. As a result, my promotion was delayed compared to male colleagues.

Organizational support. Many (10) women CEOs stated that they could become a CEO because their performance was fairly evaluated by multiple decision makers in their MNC. Particularly, support from their immediate non-Korean supervisors was a crucial factor that affected the women CEOs' career success. One participant stated:

> When I was a junior partner in my company, my supervisor from the U.K. was extremely instrumental in building my career to become a global leader in the MNC. Sometimes, I wonder what if I had had a male Korean supervisor instead of him.

Compliance. A few women CEOs stated that they might have been chosen for the CEO position due to their work ethic that their MNC values. There were situations that the women were passed over in promotion by male Korean CEOs but were asked to become a CEO after the company experienced incompliance issues with men. A women CEO provided her testimonial:

> It has been only three to four years since MNCs in Korea appointed women CEOs. I think that's because they began to recognize the importance of compliance in business. Many MNCs had appointed male Korean CEOs but due to their Korean business practices (e.g., drinking, entertainment), they began to hire women CEOs.

Career Challenges

Interview participants stated that they have faced career challenges that largely come from traditional culture, work stress, and work-life balance.

Traditional culture. Many (10) participants spoke of hierarchical and rigid Korean culture as a major challenge in their career. They had difficulty in speaking up in their jobs, particularly in their formative years, due to the gender inequality prevalent in Korea. A woman CEO witnessed:

> In Korea where women are expected to be subservient, I was outspoken as the only woman in the department. Even when male colleagues eat out or smoke together, I was working and working, so other people and even a male Korean CEO didn't like me.

Korean culture definitely has a positive side. A few women CEOs expressed the strength

of Korean culture as team spirit, hard work, commitment, and being performance-driven. One

woman CEO witnessed:

> My challenge as CEO is to balance Western and Korean culture by minimizing the
> negative side and encouraging the positive side of Korean culture, which should be
> aligned with the headquarters' strategic direction. By positive Korean culture, I mean
> once people make a decision on what they should do, nothing is impossible. If I convince
> people, they can do whatever should be done within a limited timeline. But Koreans' can-
> do spirit can spill over to become a military culture, if overdone, people could be
> complacent with top-down decision-making. My challenge is to strike a balance between
> the Western headquarters' strategic direction and Korean can-do spirit for performance.

Work stress. About half (7) of the participants stated that work stress is one of the

challenges they faced even after being a CEO. Their liaison role between the headquarters and

Korean customers, employees, and government has been crucial, particularly when the

headquarters do not understand Korean business practices. To these women CEOs,

communicating with both cultures was extremely challenging.

Work-life balance. Due to the frequent global business projects and trips, women CEOs

faced challenges in their work-life balance. A women CEO who took charge of a Korean office

and four Southeast Asian offices stated: "I travel overseas biweekly. I stay in Korea this week

and will be in Southeast Asia next week. Travel has become my work and life." Particularly,

women CEOs who are married with children shared similar stories concerning their struggles

with work-life balance.

Career Development Strategies

Many women CEOs stated that in-house development programs that are available in the

headquarters have been the most useful career development strategies, followed by mentors and

networking and English skills.

In-house development programs. In-house global leadership development and coaching programs (10) surfaced as the most useful career development strategies, followed by MBA (6) and outsourced training programs (4). A woman CEO shared her experience in a coaching program:

> I had participated in a coaching program offered by my company for one year right after being a CEO. The headquarters sent me a coach from Hong Kong, and we met on a weekly basis to develop my leadership skills. It was made possible by the headquarters' recognition of my potential as a CEO.

Mentors and networking. Of 12 participants that had mentors, nine participants stated that their mentors were their supervisors in the previous companies who were mostly non-Koreans. Our participants' mentors played an important role in their career/leadership development and/or advice on changing their jobs. They were also involved in various groups for networking including people in the same industries and women leaders' meetings (e.g., Women Corporate Directors). Nine participants stated that meetings with CEOs at KCMC, for instance, were an important channel to build professional networks.

English communication skills. When asked about their strategies to master English skills, several participants stated that they have studied English for a long time through a private school or self-study. However, a participant stated that English was not as significant as communication:

> I have never studied or lived overseas so I don't speak English well. But I can speak English to the level of communicating what I want to say. As a woman CEO of an MNC, I must say we should pay more attention to logical reasoning rather than focusing too much on English because English is just a tool for communication.

Discussion

In this study, we explored how women of MNCs at Korea have overcome career challenges in the process of becoming CEOs. To answer the two research questions on the

women CEOs' career challenges and strategies, we conducted interviews with 15 participants and found themes including becoming a CEO, key success factors, MNC culture, career challenges, and career development strategies. Based on the study findings, we discuss the significance of the study, implications for research and practice, and study limitations.

Significance of the Study

In this study, we found the importance of culture in answering the question of *how* women CEOs at MNCs have overcome career challenges. The influence of hierarchical and rigid Korean culture in their formative years has made them choose a MNC as the workplace where they can speak their minds, get exposed to the headquarters by outstanding performance, and experience diverse jobs and positions through supervisor support, to become CEOs. Extant literature indicates that women leaders face challenges when communicating between two cultures due to a gap in cultural values (Cheung and Halpern, 2010; Tran and Tran, 2016), but Korean women CEOs have managed to close the gap by maneuvering cultural differences between Western headquarters' culture that is based on shared values, organizational support, and compliance and Korean culture that is based on Confucianism, collectivism, and the military culture. Given a plethora of research on women leaders conducted largely in Western contexts, this qualitative study on lived experiences of women CEOs in MNCs contributes to emerging non-Western research (e.g., Alwazzan and Rees, 2016) by capturing the importance of culture that is uniquely Korean.

What have been the key success factors for these women leaders to become CEOs? We found that both internal and external factors combined were instrumental in the women CEOs' career success. Given that only a few studies have conducted predictors of internal and external factors for success, a meta-analysis (Ng *et al.*, 2005) explored predictors of objective and

subjective career success for both genders. In the current study, we found that our participants

were passionate, hard-working, challenging, persistent, and positive as other successful men and

women leaders are (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Cho *et al.*, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2017). What stood out from

this study was that the women's desirable personality attributes might not have been materialized

without MNC culture that has been supportive for these women. The women CEOs shared their

company's values and philosophy that is based on gender equality, received supervisor support

that is crucial for their career success, experienced diverse jobs and positions along the way, and

were recognized for their work ethic.

Implications for Research

In this study, organizational support (especially, supervisor support) was a crucial factor

to women CEOs' career success. The women CEOs' supervisors cared about their personal

needs, provided individual coaching or mentoring, and challenged them to achieve superior

performance. In addition, performance evaluation and in-house global leadership programs

greatly contributed to their advancement. Given research on organizational support for leadership,

human resource practices, and working conditions (Carter *et al.,* 2013; Cho and Egan, 2013;

Kurtessis *et al.*, 2017; Walsh, Fleming, & Enz, 2016), this study's findings have qualitatively

confirmed the importance of organizational support for women CEOs' career success.

Comparison of organizational support for women leaders in MNCs and Korean companies using

the instruments developed in organizational support scholarship might be useful to clarify to

what extent women leaders receive or lack organizational support depending upon the cultural

context.

The women CEOs' diverse marital status included being married with children, single,

divorced, and widowed, as shown in Table 1. Using a critical incident technique (Flanagan,

1954), we might find career challenges (e.g., divorce) that have not been exposed in Korea where getting married is highly encouraged but marrying age is delayed and the fertility rate is being lowered. We might also identify their career strategies and compelling life stories that have been crucial to their career success after experiencing critical incidents in their career. A divorced woman CEO, for instance, spoke of her divorce as the most critical incident in her life that has made her committed to work but simultaneously has been the cause of unnecessary attention from men in business. Phenomenological research on these women leaders may provide hidden life stories that have encouraged or slowed their career success, and, in the process, will present implications for career paths that are less common.

Despite only a few studies on women CEOs at MNCs (e.g., Dragoni *et al.*, 2014), we found the topic has great potential in being developed as indigenous research (McLean, 2010) in which an awareness of the importance of cultural context in research on women in leadership can be built. While research on women in leadership has largely been conducted in Western contexts (e.g., Madsen and Scribner, 2017), we have just begun to explore what is going on in diverse contexts in Korea (e.g., Cho and McLean, 2018), Asia (e.g., Cho *et al.*, 2017), and other parts of the world (e.g., Madsen *et al.*, 2015). In this context, in case studies of long-tenured women CEOs (Table 1), we might identify particular challenges that surface when communicating between the two cultures and explore the coping strategies (e.g., women CEOs' network in KCMC) that women CEOs employ to manage the challenges in relation to cultural differences.

The study findings also have implications for theorizing women in leadership (e.g., Ely and Myerson, 2000), given a lack of leadership theories for women (Madsen and Jones, 2017). A complex process of becoming women CEOs (Figure 1) can be explained by multifaceted factors involved: early experiences, personality attributes, organizational support, critical incidents, and

cultural differences. Although research in Western contexts (e.g., Ramaswami *et al.*, 2010) indicates that talented women are provided access to mentors and role models early in their careers, we did not focus on women CEOs' early experiences related to the development of their self-identity as a leader (Harman & Sealy, 2017). For theory building in women in leadership, we suggest that researchers investigate the complex process of becoming women CEOs, including their early experiences in their career in tandem with family background, organizational climate, and national culture.

Implications for Practice

The study findings on women CEOs' career strategies can be used as a reference for women in the leadership pipeline who aspire to take leadership positions in organizations. A lack of role models or mentors for women leaders is one of the reasons why women give up on their career (Fels, 2004; Ibarra *et al.*, 2013). Learning career strategies (e.g., global development programs, mentoring, and networks) that women CEOs have employed to overcome their career challenges can help women in the leadership pipeline from their early career on.

The concerted support of the government and organizations in affordable childcare and longer paid maternity leave are the two driving factors for female economic empowerment across OECD countries (Teow *et al.*, 2018). When asked what internal and external support they need, participants spoke of the importance of parental leaves for women's child delivery and care that should be triangulated by families, organizations, and the government in order for women to have seamless career paths without interruptions and for organizations to have smooth, continued job functions without missed knowledge and tasks. The support from organizations, as they say, should also be extended for women to resume the jobs they want without culture shock.

We found that women CEOs are under a lot of work stress generated from the nature of cultural differences between Western and Korean culture, in addition to pressure on continued outstanding performance. They are also pressured to plan ahead of their career to see if they should stay on, move on to regional offices, or out. Under the circumstances of not having mentors (especially, women mentors) and being the top manager, women CEOs' work stress is paramount. Several women stated that they would want to retire early, do volunteer work related to women's leadership, or use their talent when needed, but most women did not have specific future plans in mind. Their work stress and career planning are relevant career development topics in ways that HRD should pay attention to make their career continued, sustainable, and, most importantly, meaningful.

We also found that English communication skills have been a neglected career challenge for women CEOs at MNCs. When asked how they have improved their English skills, their answers were not coherent. One long-tenured woman CEO (Figure 1) stated that she has been attending an English class early in the morning in the past decades, while the other woman CEO spoke of her view of English as just a communication tool, and thus, speaking English fluently was not on her agenda as important. From the perspective of communication between the two cultures (Tran and Tran, 2016), however, the women CEOs' command of the English language should not be considered insignificant.

Study Limitations

When it comes to study limitations, we purposefully selected women CEOs at MNCs in Korea to explore what has made them succeed and wanted to capture critical factors that might have contributed to their career success. Our research focus was the women CEOs' career challenges but we might not have identified other critical factors that have not surfaced.

Recruiting those who have been left out, have been fired, or have had to move to other companies might compensate for our sampling bias of selecting only successful women CEOs. Exit interviews with women who could not have become CEOs might give us a full picture of what it means to become a woman CEO at MNCs in Korea.

Another issue concerns one-third of participants from pharmaceutical MNCs in our sample. Five women CEOs reflect a recent trend of the increasing number of women CEOs in the pharmaceutical industry that appreciates their expertise and the increased importance of compliance in business. However, we did not have any women CEOs in information technology (IT) and manufacturing companies that are still considered challenging for women to become CEOs, even in MNC contexts, due to severe competitions in business and an unfavorable family-friendly corporate culture such as long work hours. Due to this study's limited sample, therefore, we caution that study findings are contextualized and are open to further investigation with women CEOs in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored how women leaders at MNCs in Korea have succeeded to become CEOs. In other studies (Cho *et al.*, 2015; Cho *et al.*, 2016; Cho *et al.*, 2017), we examined the lived experiences of women leaders in Korean companies and found that they had difficulties in their work-life balance and career and leadership development due to the gendered workplace where Korean traditional values (e.g., Confucianism), collectivism, and military culture dictate what they can and cannot do. The common themes and threads we have identified from research on women in leadership in Korea indicate the fundamental importance of culture, no matter where they work, Korean companies or MNCs.

The deciding factor for the career success of MNCs' women CEOs lies in organizational support they have received in the form of supervisor support and feedback, gender equality policies and programs, and recognition of women's work ethic. Organizational support is highly relevant to explain why women leaders at MNCs in Korea, in comparison with women leaders in Korean companies, have successfully overcome career challenges to become CEOs. Given the limited literature on the topic, this study sheds fresh light on the experiences of women CEOs at MNCs and suggests ways to improve their work environments. HRD in both MNCs and Korean companies can take insights from our participants' narratives on what it takes for women leaders to become CEOs.

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