

Understanding Gender and Women's Positioning in Organisations - A Literature Review

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Abstract: *Gender being a social construction, women and men world over are subject to the effects of what the society expects from them. Currently around the globe women are entering the labour force much more than the past but it is evident that women are mostly the majority at the lower organizational levels. In contrast the top of the organizational hierarchy is governed by the men and this is true for the developed world as well as for the global south. This tendency on male domination in organisations is a result of a system of stratifying men and women differently and structuring personal and work lives of either gender. Thus women's work lives are affected due to the effects of gender and they are positioned in the lower rungs of organisations. As discussed in literature cumulative disadvantage of blocked opportunities causes women's under representation at higher ranks. Adding to the same women managers experience challenges not faced by their male counterparts because of the dominant masculinist ethos of corporate management culture that privileges men. Thus the effect of gender as a social construction to a greater extent decides where women are positioned in organizational hierarchies.*

Keywords: Gender, Social Construction, Women, Under-representation, Organisations

1. Introduction

'Gender' is a concept that is being used so often by everyone but no one other than researchers and/or feminists is interested in understanding the impact of it on women and men. Within such a context, today women are entering the world of work much more than the past. In contrast, however much the developments take place in the 'gender' arena, according to Acker (2009) women still does not hold top leadership positions in organizations of the wealthy industrialized countries. Similarly in the global south women's under representation in the top positions of organisations is evident and in Sri Lanka, a developing country, there are no women in boards of directors' in 70% (approx) of large private sector organizations (Jayaweera, 2008). Accordingly this paper attempts to compose literature relating to understanding gender and its impact on women and men and the positioning of women within organisations. The paper will begin with literature relating to the concept of gender followed by its effects on men and women. It will then present the entering of women into the organizations continued by a discussion on the nature of women's representation in organisations and literature relating to visibility of women in the midst of male domination.

Gender and its different perspectives

People in the whole world depending on their biological differences, basically gets divided into two categories as women and men. This categorization is known as the gender division. Gender division not only divides people into categories but assign certain roles to each of them which they follow throughout their lives without much of a hesitation and questioning. Accordingly, 'Gender' is a concept that is being used so often by any person but no one other than researchers, feminists etc. is interested in understanding the impact of it on women and men. It is taken for granted to such an extent that everyone takes it in the given way and follows it.

Gender is so much the routine ground of everyday activities that questioning its taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions is like wondering about whether the sun will come up. Gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Yet gender, like culture, is a human production that depends on everyone constantly "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

According to Lober (1994) Gender is such a familiar part of daily life that it usually takes a deliberate disruption of our expectations of how women and men are supposed to act to pay attention to how it is produced. Gender signs and signals are so ubiquitous that we usually fail to note them - unless they are missing or ambiguous. Then we are uncomfortable until we have successfully placed the other person in a gender status; otherwise, we feel socially dislocated.

'Gender' is not a concept that can be defined easily. One cannot just do it by looking at a person's anatomy, but in a deeper sense its meaning goes beyond the categorizing as female and male. Apart from the biological differences of either gender it is an accepted fact that they are not identical, but women and men are naturally different in many ways. Similarly, gender cannot be equated with biological and physiological differences between human females and males. The building blocks of gender are socially constructed statuses (Lober, 1994).

Hence, in a broader sociological perspective gender can be defined as a concept which is determined socially or in other words a social construction. People's mind sets are conditioned socially to assign specific traits attributes etc. to respective genders. Through the interactions of these psycho-social determinants and mechanisms, which socializes humans within the society, a male or female infant gets developed into a masculine or feminine adult.

Individuals and gender

Individuals when born to the world do not possess any preconceptions about their gender. As discussed above it is the society and culture that ascribe the roles for respective genders. If not, for females or males it is the sameness that they expect in every aspect of their life.

“For human beings there is no essential femaleness or maleness, femininity or masculinity, womanhood or manhood, but once gender is ascribed, the social order constructs and holds individuals to strongly gendered norms and expectations. Individuals may vary on many of the components of gender and may shift genders temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses their society recognizes. In the process, they re-create their society's version of women and men: "If we do gender appropriately, we simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements If we fail to do gender appropriately, we as individuals – not the institutional arrangements - may be called to account (for our character, motives, and predispositions)" (West and Zimmerman ,1987).

As noted by Lober (1994) the gendered practices of everyday life reproduce a society's view of how women and men should act. Gendered social arrangements are justified by religion and cultural productions and backed by law, but the most powerful means of sustaining the moral hegemony of the dominant gender ideology is that the process is made invisible; any possible alternatives are virtually unthinkable (Gramsci 1971).

Accordingly women as well as men play certain roles with in their personal, social and work lives. These are called the gender roles. Attitudes relating to gender roles prevailing in any society regulate the behaviors of women and men. Gender role attitudes reflect social definitions of femininity and masculinity and define gender-appropriate behaviors based on culturally specific norms.

Gender and society

Society is the network that ties the social arrangements together to function as a meaningful whole. To ensure sustenance and smooth functioning, society has its rules and regulations among which gender segregation is one of the most crucial ones.

“The pervasiveness of gender as a way of structuring social life demands that gender statuses be clearly differentiated. Varied talents, sexual preferences, identities, personalities, interests, and ways of interacting fragment the individual's bodily and social experiences. Nonetheless, these are organized in Western cultures into two and only two socially and legally recognized gender statuses, "man" and "woman." In the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do; it does not even matter if they do exactly the same thing. The social institution of gender insists only that what they do is *perceived* as different”(Lober,1994).

Accordingly societies world over expect their women and men to believe, accept and follow the socially determined gender roles without questioning so that it will enable the societies to function smoothly.

Gender as a Process, Stratification, and Structure

When a society regulates gender for the sustenance it result in blind acceptance of given status. Hence this regulation of gender can be viewed as a process creating differences among men and women, a system of stratifying men and women differently and structuring personal and work lives of either gender.

Lober (1994), states “As a social institution, gender is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses for the assignment of rights and responsibilities. As part of a stratification system that ranks these statuses unequally, gender is a major building block in the social structures built on these unequal statuses. As a *process*, gender creates the social differences that define “woman” and “man.” In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order: “The very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once” (Butler 1990, 145). Members of a social group neither make up gender as they go along nor exactly replicate in rote fashion what was done before. In almost every encounter, human beings produce gender, behaving in the ways they learned were appropriate for their gender status, or resisting or rebelling against these norms. Resistance and rebellion have altered gender norms, but so far they have rarely eroded the statuses. Everyday gendered interactions build gender into the family, the work process, and other organizations and institutions, which in turn reinforce gender expectations for individuals ... [sic] ... As part of a stratification system, gender ranks men above women of the same race and class. Women and men could be different but equal. In practice, the process of creating difference depends to a great extent on differential evaluation ... [sic] ... As a structure, gender divides work in the home and in economic production, legitimates those in authority, and organizes sexuality and emotional life”.

Women's positioning in work organizations

As pointed out by Acker (2009) women rarely represent top positions in organisations in the developed and it is the same for the organisations in the global south as well (Jayaweera, 2008). Apart from their lower representation at the level positions there is a doubt whether women are getting the same treatments as their male counterparts.

According to Gadiesh, O., and Coffman (2010) “Companies say they treat men and women equally

— but in reality, they don't. Our recent gender-parity survey of more than 1,800 business people worldwide, conducted in association with HBR.org, shows that in fact, employees are disappointed with the way their company handles the issue of gender parity — the attempt to treat men and women equally in the workforce. Nearly 80 percent of women and men say they are convinced of the benefits of gender parity at all levels. But only about 20 percent believe their companies actually put meaningful resources behind it. Most companies simply fall down in the follow-through. Almost three-quarters of respondents say their companies launched initiatives like flex work programs and mentorships, but fewer than 25 percent feel they are effective. Employees just don't see enough women in leadership positions at their company. Just 8 percent believe their firms effectively tied incentives and compensation to gender parity.”

Much of the literature is in agreement with the fact that women are still scarce in top leadership positions in organizations world over. This happens in the midst of an increasing number of women entering into prestigious professions mainly due to increased gender equity in education. Acker (2009) discusses the above scenario as follows; “some scholars have questioned the accuracy of the metaphor, “glass ceiling”, arguing that it implies orderly upward progression that is then rudely obstructed by an invisible barrier just short of the top prize (Eagly and Carli, 2007). These critics point out that barriers exist all the way along the route to management suite. A broader definition of the glass ceiling simply assumes that the cumulative disadvantage of blocked opportunities (no matter where they occur) causes women's under representation at higher ranks.....”(Prokos and Padavic, 2005).

As noted by Ahmanson and Ohlund (2008) “International studies have established that men holding leading positions by far outnumber women, both private corporations and in the public sector (see Morrison and Von Glinow 1990; Simeonova (2000). Minority women are even less likely to hold management positions (Tang, 1997).”

Literature highlight that males select males and as a result male hierarchies get reproduced. For example, Brown and Ridge (2002) examined career progression of men and women representing public sector in West Australia and found that men have increased in their share of employment in all management tiers in women dominated agencies, while the proportion of women in agencies dominated by men continues to be on the same low level (Ahmanson and Ohlund, 2008).

According to Watts (2009) “Despite the large increase in the numbers of women entering the labour market in recent years (Burke and Nelson, 2002), they remain under-represented in corporate leadership roles (Vinnicombe and Singh, 2002). A wide literature on the gendered relations of management has developed (Davidson and Burke, 2002; Smith, 2000; Wajcman, 1998) suggests that, although equal opportunity and affirmative action are now embedded within

corporate recruitment strategy, women are still unable to raise to top management posts in significant numbers”.

Women as a minority in work organizations

Kanter's (1993) seminal work on the sociology of gender explores the mechanics of corporate behaviour as well as the particular problems minorities face in achieving workplace advancement. The term ‘minority’ refers to any cohort that represents less than 50 percent of the total, and to which the feature of standing out as different attaches. Kanter (1993) argues that minority status always involves the attribute of visibility that can have both positive and negative effects. Central to this ambivalence is the issue of risk; high visibility is positive when things are going well and targets are achieved but, in the face of poor performance or costly errors, visibility becomes problematic under the watchful gaze of critical colleagues and superiors. When newcomers who are different (for example, in terms of culture, gender and ethnicity) join an established homogeneous group they can represent a potential challenge to the majority. One response to reinforce the dominant culture of the majority is what Kanter terms boundary heightening, that can be understood as actions by the majority to emphasize their group characteristics to make the newcomer feel as different and ‘outside’ as possible. Thus, for example, when a woman enters a male-dominated workplace sexual jokes and crude language may become overt rather than repressed. In some settings the physicality of the workplace can border on sexual harassment – this holds particular resonance for women working on construction sites where women and other highly visible minorities are the butt of lewd jokes and comic innuendo

The consequences for women in a workplace where men define themselves as the norm are varied and contextual, but these can be usefully summarized as the necessity to overcome their ‘otherness’ An extreme form of ‘otherness’ is where women have the ‘only woman’ status and become tokens, accruing on the one hand, the advantage of being different and visible but, on the other hand, having to face the loneliness of outsider estrangement from male peers. The potential for outsider estrangement, however, is not solely determined by gender demarcations, and the work of Kerfoot and Knights (2004) and Connell (1995, 2002) has contributed to understandings of the ways in which ‘male’ and ‘masculinity’ are socially constructed. Developing the theme of male heterogeneity, Connell (1995, 2002) argues, for example, that while the top corporate management roles are populated by men, these are not just any men but those who come from the middle and upper classes who have been educated at the best universities with access to those holding organizational power (Ravlin and Thomas, 2005).

According to Amidu and Abor (2006) the composition of Corporate boards, particularly with respect to gender, is a growing area of study (see Catalyst 2001: Fagenson and Jackson 1994; Heidrick and Struggles, Inc 1977; Sheridan 2001). Reasons for the increased awareness of this issue include greater attention to diversity in Organizations and the realization of the competitive advantage that may result from having women on Corporate Boards. However, these studies were limited to the study of a few structural factors, mainly organization size and industry.

Women's visibility in the midst of male domination

The issue of visibility, as an underpinning theme of much of the data, constitutes the final paradox. Women within construction, particularly those in supervisory/management roles, are highly visible. On building sites this takes the form of embodied spectacle and appears difficult to negotiate. Embodied visibility contrasts with women's continuing cultural invisibility, adding to their frustration with an industry that is nationally modernizing but in reality is very resistant to change. The discourses of construction are shaped by a masculine hegemonic view that reinforces and supports the invisibility of women, with all grades of management heavily controlled by men (Fielden et al., 2000). The discursive power of male primacy is reinforced by management practices and women have to adjust their work styles to accommodate the challenges they face arising from the visibility continuum. Women can resist these dominant discourses only by leaving industry, by voicing opposition or by remaining compliant. Other research, however, has found that women's presence in organizational leadership roles does not necessarily lead to gender policy development (Hearn and Piekari, 2005).

2. Conclusion

Although gender as a social construction has its effects on the lives of women as well as men less attention is paid to understand these effects. However, Organisations world over now has more women than the past but women still does not hold top leadership positions in organizations of the wealthy industrialized countries as well as in the global south. Irrespective of being women or men when performing as employees they are subject to effects of gender. It is because gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life. Thus, the gendered practices of everyday life reproduce a society's view of how women and men should behave in different contexts. Accordingly societies world over expect their women and men to believe, accept and follow the socially determined gender roles without questioning for the societies including organisations to function smoothly. However, increased gender equity in education has enabled a growing number of women to enter into prestigious professions but women are still scarce in top leadership positions in organizations world over. This tendency lead to women being the 'other' and an extreme form of 'otherness' is where women have the 'only woman' status and become tokens, accruing on the one hand, the advantage of being different and visible but, on the other hand, having to face the loneliness among male peers. Women managers, especially in male dominated organisations, are highly visible and this can make them vulnerable as targets of prejudice and hostile responses, when they are facing the competing demands of their roles as women and as well as managers. To conclude it is worth to note that although gender has its effects on both women and men, women are at a disadvantageous position when they are in the world of work.

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