“The Elephant in the Room”: Neglected Construct of Occupational Sexism

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Occupational sexism refers to the discrimination based on sex of the individual at workplace. Theoretically, it can be applicable to both men and women. However, it is mostly the women who are evidenced to be victims of occupational sexism¹⁻⁶ in line with the general concept of sexism which the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as sex-based prejudice or discrimination, typically against women.⁷ Though we do not deny the occupational sexism experience of males, due to unavailability of literature regarding the same, here we will discuss the issues mainly in the context of females.

Theories of Occupational Sexism

The question of why occupational sexism is a construct can be answered by discussing some relevant findings published in both white papers and grey literature. The first is the social theory of gender role and gender stereotype, leading to sexism. Women have traditionally been expected to take more domestic responsibilities than professional employment. Despite the change in this trend post-World War-II⁸ and the gradual increase in number of women in the workforce, the gender role stereotypes of the society have not changed much. There are a number of social stereotypes associated with female gender, including domestic role idealization, more emotional sensitivity, concern, and sociability, and lack of assertiveness, independence, leadership quality, and professional competency.⁹ These prejudices may act overtly or covertly toward the discrimination of women at the workplace. Another theory is that of emotion politics. This is based on the emotional stereotyping of women of being gullible, shy, modest, and communal. Expression of emotions, especially anger, by a woman is often attributed to internal cause rather than external situations. This is however opposite in case of men.¹⁰ Aggression, pride, and anger are traditionally described as masculine emotions.¹¹ A study done in 2008 observed a differential status conferral to men and women at an employment setting based on anger expression. It was found that women who expressed anger were given lower status, whereas men exhibiting anger were given higher status.¹⁰ This emotion politics may lead to underestimation of the situational trigger in case of women, and thus enabling the adversity to continue. It has been noticed time and again that individuals not following culture-specific typical gender roles receive societal backlash.¹² This repercussion acts differentially on the deviant and the perceiver where perceivers have an upliftment of self-esteem and deviants feel negative emotions and often resort to secrecy and deception to protect themselves from discrimination. This process eventually maintains the gender stereotype in the society.¹² This basic construct of sexism, often inherently present in the individuals, is likely to act at the professional domains as well, and create occupational sexism.

Evidence of Occupational Sexism Across Organizations and Fields

Occupational sexism can manifest in various ways, in different domains of professional employment. Though overt sexism is easier to detect, the larger share of it is covert and subtle. Glick and Fiske’s model of ambivalent sexism explains the issue in a comprehensive way. As per this model, occupational sexism may consist of both hostile and benevolent sexism. The hostile sexism is crude and more obvious, whereas the benevolent sexism indicates subtle but deep-rooted gender discrimination (eg, considering women as vulnerable, kind, nurturing).¹³ Both are essentially negative in connotation and set the efforts toward gender equality at
naught. In a study on the Australian Trade Union employees, the women workers reported of organizational sexism associated with reduced sense of belongingness which led to poorer job satisfaction. The hypothesized reasons are those of ostracization, bullying, rejection from male coworkers leading to loneliness, and alienation. The European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE) mentions multiple levels at which sexism can occur at workplace, including at the levels of application, recruitment, performance assessment, and feedback, task allocation, participation in meetings, promotion, and care responsibilities. A few salient findings can be quoted from the EIGE findings. Women are seen to earn 16% less than men per hour. They tend to apply less for jobs advertised in a way obviating masculine preference. This shows 2 important facets of sexism. First, the women themselves may associate words like “competitive”, “aggressive” more to men, because of the conditioning in strict gender role assignment since birth or early childhood. The second facet is the recruiter’s bias, resulting in presentation of information in a way favoring a particular gender group. The EIGE also observes that performance evaluators often describe more relationship-focused qualities in women and more task-oriented and analytical qualities in men. Women may be allocated tasks not contributing to promotion, not pertaining to profession per se, but more conducive to their stereotyped gender role (eg, planning parties). Vocal participation in a meeting is often less for women and they tend to get interrupted more while speaking. Their success is often attributed to factors other than their competency, influence, and leadership.

Organizational structures and the human resource (HR) practices often endorse gender inequality as seen by Stamarski and Son Hing. All of the HR policies, decisions, and enactments may be blemished by obvious or subtle sexism, if there is institutional discrimination in the organizational structures, processes, or practices. A few examples will be institutional bias against recruitment of women manifested by unsuitable eligibility criteria, bias in performance evaluation by choice of unfair performance metric, gender-segregated job ladders and opportunities, slower career progression despite capability, personal discrimination (negative evaluation in male-typed jobs, fewer callbacks after job interview), lesser pay than to the male counterparts, prejudice of less agency in women, verbal or nonverbal behaviors conveying sexist attitude toward female employees, and so on. It is interesting to note that both assertive and task-oriented women as well as pregnant women are discriminated at workplace, albeit for different reasons. A more severe form of occupational sexism manifests as gender harassment, which is more obvious than the abstruse discrimination and biases ingrained into the policies and decisions of the organization.

The so-called white-collar jobs and factories are not the only professions affected by sexism. Law, medicine, academia, and several other fields are also influenced by it. It was mentioned by Eansor and Lafreniere that despite an increase in number of women in the field of law, a significant number leaves the profession. In the study, 277 women reported negative workplace experience and gender discrimination, associated with poorer job satisfaction and higher burnout. The academia is another such field with evidence of occupational sexism. Fewer women become professors, academic staff, hold higher administrative designations, or get equivalent pay to the male colleagues in the UK as indicated in a study. The pay gap reportedly exists even after the enactment of “Equal Pay Act.” Similarly, there are other studies putting forward various other difficulties encountered by women in the academia, including complex systematic barrier to advancement in universities, dominant masculinity, perceived less employability, and cultural sexism, almost similar to that chronicled earlier. Disadvantage in research opportunities is also reported, though 1 study on the peer review process of 6 journals over a period of time found no gender bias during the review process. However, the underrepresentation of women in scientific research is substantiated time and again. A study assessing 60 major medical journals found significant underrepresentation of women in the editorial board, with considerably low percentage of women as editors-in-chief. Gender stereotypes of male association with science, and perception of women staying for shorter duration in the scholarly courses, are a few correlates, disproved though. One potential consideration is the childcare and responsibility. Williams et al concluded that campus childcare centers could be a possible solution and female administrators were found more supportive.

Medicine, too, is not naïve to the occupational sexism. It has similar attributes as compared to other fields, along with male-favoring criteria for promotions and grants as pointed out in a study by Burgess. Gender discrimination can come from the patients too, in the medical profession. Perception of women to be paramedics more than medical professionals, and more reliance on the male medics are commonly experienced by the female doctors. It can be covertly or overtly conveyed by the male coworkers as well. An article by Solomon in 1978 mentioned a phrase “professional chauvinism” in psychiatry, based on the observations of gender discrimination and differential treatment of female mental health professionals, lesser attendance in academic presentations by female psychiatrists, and beliefs of male superiority. A 2018 study echoed the same stating that women in psychiatry receive fewer merit awards, have lower professional status, and are poorly represented in the academic psychiatry. Here, it is worth mentioning that under representation, a marker of occupational sexism is not an absolute parameter. Even if the representation increases in number, it is the quality of the professional environment that may get affected seriously by sexism. Another pertinent point is that sexism does not start de-novo at the occupational level in most cases. It starts with the societal gender role assignment during upbringing and educational opportunities received by girls as compared to boys. Women often have
fewer opportunities and face classroom biases, influencing their risk avoidance, choice of subject, and career in the later life. UNICEF data suggest that only 66% of the countries across the world have gender parity in education. The trend is affirmed by the global literacy rates which are still higher in men than women, despite an overall increase. All these findings point toward an existing occupational sexism, starting from the educational level, rendering women “invisible” in the path of the professional career.

Indian Scenario

India ranks 112th in gender equality index among 153 countries in the world as of 2020 Global Gender Gap Index. In a newspaper report, it was found that 85% of Indian women experience occupational sexism in terms of pay raise, promotion, and job opportunities. Perception of job opportunities and equal pay is also lower in women as compared to men. Women (more than 70%) are often seen to juggle between career and family responsibilities, often adversely affecting their career. The gender parity score in India was 0.668 in 2020, which is still considerably low. Coming to the education, literacy rate of women is still much lower than men in India like other developing countries, with a gender gap of almost 17% points as of 2018 and 14% as of 2020. Very few systematic scientific studies have been done in India to assess occupational sexism and most discussion is from media reports which may be biased. One study was conducted in 2018 that evaluated organizational sexism, gender stereotypes, and myths, and coping and response by women in India. Themes that emerged are in line with the global findings, including workplace being equivalent to masculinity, women being considered as unduly emotional and histrionic, manipulation as the woman’s tool to success, and perception of women lacking work-life balance. The author concluded that gender discrimination still exists at workplace, in a substantial amount, despite laws and several efforts trying to uphold the notion of equal rights.

Impact on Mental Health

Occupational sexism has considerable negative impact on the mental health of women. Sexism at workplace, compounded with psychosocial stressors including caregiving burden to intimate partner violence, is found to affect women’s general well-being. Subtle and interpersonal forms of sexism are seen to be as detrimental to the women’s mental health as overt, crude forms, and sexual harassment. Those facing or perceiving gender discrimination at work scored high on depression, even after controlling for confounding factors like socioeconomic condition. Another large-scale study on Korean women also found higher odds of depression in women experiencing discrimination at workplace, in regard to hiring, wage, promotion, and job termination. A Columbia University study in 2016 found fourfold higher risk of anxiety and almost twice the risk of depression in women due to gender wage gap. Perceived discrimination is shown to negatively impact both mental and physical health, related to increased stress response and nonparticipation in healthy behavior. Similar findings were obtained in a larger-scale national longitudinal survey by the Indiana University exploring workplace discrimination and women’s health. To sum up, occupational sexism gives rise to sense of alienation, poor self-esteem, frustration, loneliness, poor job satisfaction, contributing to persistently increased stress response, anxiety, and depression.

Recommendations and Interventions

With the available evidence, it will be fair to conclude that occupational sexism is a persistent construct, affecting mostly the women and their mental as well as physical health. It has its roots in the social and cultural sexist beliefs, continually reinforced by the tightly bound societal mechanisms. To deal with occupational sexism, we need to start at the core. Discussing the ways to uproot sexism as a whole is beyond the scope of this editorial. Here, we would like to propose a few possible recommendations pertaining to occupational sexism and its prevention and management.

National and International Level

1. Improving educational opportunities of females by making the right to education gender-neutral, in line with the UNICEF sustainable development goal 2030 agenda.
2. Ensuring proper implementation of laws and programs that promote gender equality.
3. Monitoring and surveillance of private and public places of employment at regular intervals, with assessment of maintenance of gender equality therein.
4. Awareness and IEC (information, education, communication) campaigns on the need of gender equality, and rights of women from all socioeconomic strata against gender discrimination.

Occupational Level

1. Formulation of gender-neutral policies.
2. Internal feedback, monitoring, and surveillance system (eg, CCTV and audio monitoring) for detection and management of gender discrimination.
3. Incorporating gender equality as a mandatory attribute and including it in the training programs for employees.
4. Accessible, nondiscriminatory, unbiased, and confidential reporting system for occupational sexism, and dissemination of adequate information and education regarding that.
5. Childcare options at the workplace to support women who are mothers.
6. Strict penal provision for any kind of overt or subtle, hostile, or benevolent sexism for every level of worker, including the administrative chief.

**Social and Individual Level**

1. Gender role stereotypes to be unlearned and discouraged, thereby encouraging an equal distribution of domestic, childcare, and professional responsibilities among men and women.
2. Reinforcers (social, emotional, economic, political) to the sociocultural sexism to be identified and removed. Mass and social media have a vital role to play in this regard, especially modifying the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes in movies and culture.
3. Self-assessments for biases like belief of superiority, professional and social expectations, acceptance of or contempt for specific emotional expression based on gender, and modification as necessary, by continuously educating oneself.
4. Gender equality needs to be promoted from early childhood. Gender-neutral equality-based school education and home environment will ultimately bring in the changes by changing the gender-related beliefs in children growing up to be future citizens.

**Conclusion: Glimpses of Optimism**

Though a once-and-for-all solution to the eternal issue of occupational sexism is not too near, the gradual albeit slow change in the societal microstructure and cultural expectations are rays of hope. Recognition of females as commanders at par with males in the Indian Military by the Supreme Court is an example of one such welcome change, long-awaited and well-deserved. There has been a steady increase in the number of women clearing medical and engineering entrance examinations as well as recruitment in sports, entertainment, and business fields.\(^{53}\) Women constituted 21% of the total Indian IT workforce in 2001 which increased to 34% in the 2017 to 2018 financial year, according to the Ministry of Electronics and Information technology.\(^{54}\) This is higher than the average level of female participation in the formal economy as of the last decade. However, as per the same data, many of them exit within 5 years of the job due to family-related reasons. As per the Medical Council of India, there has been rise in the NEET and JEE (medical entrance tests) female applicants and successful candidates over 2016 to 2019.\(^{55}\) Even though women participation in sports has been consistently increasing with renowned names and role models over the years, gender stereotypes, social myths, poverty, lack of funding, unclear career paths, and concerns about public safety form the potential barriers.\(^{56}\) It is vital to understand that though these glimpses are optimistic, occupational sexism is a pervading social process which is prevalent at all levels and often underreported and neglected.

There are several governmental and nongovernmental agencies working relentlessly toward addressing sexism from all paths of life. At the end of the day, it is a collective responsibility irrespective of the gender. Individual improvement as a human being with respect for equal rights and nondiscrimination will gradually enable the societal perceptions, and invariably the outlook toward women in the occupational fields.

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