

GENDER ROLES STEREOTYPES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

This literary review explores the concepts of gender, sex, stereotype, and gender roles, applied to the workspace. It is important to make the distinction between the first two terms, as they are often confused among people. Besides, this paper is focused on how gender role stereotypes influence all the processes involved in the work areas: from applying to a job, to the opportunities to advance once a person is already working in a company. Given that women are the most affected by these kinds of stereotypes, it has been necessary to study -in a brief way-, some historical moments of women's struggle to get to the same level as men in every possible aspect in the social context. In conclusion, this paper enabled the identification of gender roles stereotypes and their relevance in the work field in present days; as they lead to prejudices when meeting other people; and the division of professions into masculine and feminine these roles make, affects in a major way people's job opportunities and career development.

Key words: stereotype, gender, sex, gender role, work place.

Resumen

Esta revisión literaria indaga los conceptos de género, sexo, estereotipo y roles de género, aplicados al área de trabajo. Es importante hacer la distinción entre los dos primeros términos (sexo y género), ya que las personas los confunden fácilmente. Además, este documento se enfoca en cómo los estereotipos de género influyen en todos los procesos relacionados con el ámbito laboral: desde la postulación a un trabajo, hasta las posibles oportunidades de ascender una vez se esté trabajando en una compañía. Dado que las mujeres son las más afectadas por este tipo de estereotipos, ha sido necesario estudiar brevemente algunos hitos de la lucha de las mujeres para lograr estar al mismo nivel que los hombres en cada aspecto posible en la sociedad. En conclusión, este trabajo posibilitó la existencia de los estereotipos de roles de género y su incidencia en el campo laboral en la actualidad, ya que dan lugar a prejuicios al conocer a otras personas; y la división de profesiones como masculinas y femeninas que estos roles generan, afecta de gran manera las oportunidades laborales y el desarrollo de las carreras de las personas.

Palabras clave: estereotipo, género, sexo, roles de género, ámbito laboral.

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Gender Roles Stereotypes in the Workplace

Introduction

From a long time ago, activities in different areas have been separated by sexes, situation that has led to stereotype or generalize sexes into genders; it means that each sex has certain attitudes, abilities and qualities, depending on the societies. But this circumstance became into a problem when women were prohibited to do some of the things that men did, such as working in different fields, voting or joining a sports team; so, through some movements and actions against those established rules, they got the opportunity to attain a level of respect and equality as men in the society, even though there still is a long way to achieve that desired level of true balance.

In this way, the first segment of this document will define the terms of gender, sex and stereotype, in order to understand the complete background. Also, it shows what the differences between sex and gender are, making emphasis on the gender side, which is more relevant to this document. The second part includes a complete interpretation of what gender roles are and how those affect and divide people in the workplace, stereotyping activities and classifying them as feminine or masculine. The third piece displays a brief history on women in their struggle for equality. It also presents some data of how the women versus men situation nowadays is in workplaces in the United States and Colombia. Next, the closing considerations of the whole work are presented in the conclusions section. And finally, it is displayed a diagram following the main structure of this literature review, including the research question, the main concepts which are the core of this document (sex, gender and stereotypes), authors who better define them, and the topics discussed in the content.

Problem statement

In many companies and fields of work, the selection process of new employees can be biased and gender stereotypes that have been attached to people's minds through generations might be one main reason. Taking into account that not long ago, it was very common to assign specific tasks and responsibilities for men and women separately, the ideology of what a man and a woman can and should do has conditioned the behavior of individuals in the society throughout time. Since there is a preconceived concept of what they are supposed to do depending on their gender -for example, women are the ones who do the housecleaning and take care of the kids, while men do the heavy work-, many people do not go after what they want to do, but after what is already socially established for that particular group as a consequence. At the same time, job opportunities are denied and applicants are overlooked in determined fields based solely on the generalized idea of a man's or a woman's stereotyped capabilities.

On the other hand, when some people actually surpass the gender barrier and start working on a field that is not common for them, work environment can turn hostile. Co-workers might get threatened by working alongside someone they are not used to; they get very competitive and that leads to belittle the other, proudly believing that this "outsider" is not qualified to do the same job they are doing based on their gender. In fact, according to Van Fleet & Van Fleet (2010), males are the ones who show this type of behavior more often: "Men are more likely to feel threatened when they already harbor negative attitudes toward either females or men of other colors, races or cultures" (p. 69).

Although most of the societies in the world have come a long way, and the social breach between men and women is not as broad as it was decades ago, it is still necessary to work harder in order to achieve a more gender-equal society. One in which, regardless of their gender, -or any other aspect, for that matter-, people's abilities are fully appreciated, jobs have a fair pay, and there is a good amount of job opportunities for everyone in any field. Therefore, this literary review will be focused on how gender roles stereotype people in the workplace.

Stereotypes, sex and gender

First of all, it is appropriate to understand different concepts that will be discussed throughout this paper. Stereotype is one of the key elements that shapes this document. The work of Hamilton & Troiler in 1983 defined it as “the cognitive structure that contains a perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectancies about a human group” (as cited in Williams & Spencer-Rogers, 2010, p. 592). Adding to this, McGarty, Yzerbyt, & Spears (2002) said that in order to have an impression about a human group’s features, it is necessary to differentiate that group specifically from another one (p.3). So, considering these statements, stereotypes can be understood as the way a person analyses people and characteristics of the cultural group they belong to, identifying the existing differences between that stereotyped group and another one. Furthermore, Bordalo, Coffman, Gennaioli & Shleifer (2013) added that:

Stereotypes distort reaction to information. So long as stereotypes do not change, people under-react or even ignore information inconsistent with stereotypes. If however enough contrary information is received (e.g. observing more women than men succeeding at math) stereotypes change, leading to a drastic reevaluation of already available data. (p. 5)

According to these authors, information that contradicts stereotypes is highly overlooked unless it becomes repetitive, ignoring other potential features that describe people from that specific group, and yet, they are not necessarily applied to the whole community. From this conduct, it can be inferred that, even when people try to change a certain stereotype, they still assign a whole group a new or different characteristic, therefore, stereotyping it.

Moving on, the concepts of gender and sex are used to classify people into groups, and each one carries specific features that may lead to stereotype. But first, one must understand what these terms are, as people often mistake them. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2000), refers to gender as social, cultural and psychological implications that bestow a person feminine or masculine attributes, depending on the environment they live. (p. 10) While the American Psychological Association (APA) (2012) stated that:

Gender refers to the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person’s biological sex. Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations is referred to as gender normative; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations constitute gender nonconformity. (p. 11)

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In this way, gender could be seen as the result of the observation and experiences of the behavior of role models of each sex (such as parents, other kids and adults, cartoons, and media in general) during the first years of life, which turns the notions of femininity and masculinity into a stereotype. As a result, people in every society create certain standards that they must obey and follow; otherwise, they will be judged and rejected by their community. Moreover, given that every culture is different, expectations for each gender vary in each group. For instance, women in Latin America are able to work, whereas this is prohibited for them in some countries in the Middle East: if a Middle Eastern woman wanted to go out and get a job, her society would reject this idea, as it goes against what is expected and already established for women in that social order.

Now, when it comes to the term sex, the APA (2012) defined it as:

...A person's biological status and is typically categorized as male, female, or intersex (i.e., atypical combinations of features that usually distinguish male from female). There are a number of indicators of biological sex, including sex chromosomes, gonads, internal reproductive organs, and external genitalia. (p. 11)

Adding to that, Susan Basow's book *Sex-Role Stereotypes: Alternates & Change* in 1980, explained sex as "a biological term referring to people, animals, etc., being either female or male depending on their sex organs or genes. Sex also refers to the differences between individuals that make them male or female" (as cited in UNESCO, 2000, p. 9). Taking into account these views, it is noticeable that sex is merely a physical and biological trait that is easily recognized by one self and others. Nonetheless, gender is not necessarily related to sex, because, as it has been mentioned before, people come to terms with their gender according to their behavior and the cultural context they are. Hence, it can be remarked that boys can play with dolls, and girls can play with cars, but they are still going to maintain their own physiological features (sex); what vary is the daily activities they do, which are already labeled and stereotyped as feminine or masculine by the society.

This generalization of behaviors for each sex is called *gender role*, and will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Gender roles and workplace

Rathus (2015) identified gender role as "a cluster of traits and behaviors that are considered as stereotypical of males and females." (p. 177). To this concept, it is possible to add

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a cultural perspective; for example, Lindsay (2011) stated that “gender roles are the expected attitudes and behaviors a society associates with each sex. This definition places gender squarely in the sociocultural context.” (p.4) This idea is supported by Kidder’s paper in 2002 *The influence of gender on the performance of organizational citizenship behaviors*, by saying that “gender role theory suggests that individuals internalize cultural expectations about their gender because social pressures external to the individual favor behavior consistent with their prescribed gender role” (as cited in Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee, 2009, p.702). These works suggest that gender roles are imposed by society and, just as gender traits, they vary depending on the cultural atmosphere. At the same time, those roles modify the actions of individuals, because whenever they feel like acting against the already established conduct, they tend to adopt the “appropriate” stereotyped behavior assigned to their sex.

It is important to clarify that each gender has been assigned certain adjectives when it comes to language use over the years, which should rule the conduct of all people of the corresponding sex. Lieper (2013) and Lippa (2010) show some of those adjectives in the following table:

TABLE 8.4 CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OF "MASCULINE" AND FEMININE" TRAITS. ARE THEY ACCURATE?	
Masculine	Feminine
Adventurous	Affectionate
Aggressive	Agreeable
Assertive	Appreciative
Capable	Artistic
Coarse	Cautious
Confident	Dependent
Courageous	Emotional
Determined	Fearful
Disorderly	Fickle
Enterprising	Gentle
Hardheaded	Kind
Independent	Nurturing
Intelligent	Patient
Pleasure-seeking	Prudish
Quick	Sensitive
Rational	Sentimental
Realistic	Shy
Reckless	Softhearted
Scientific	Submissive
Sensation-seeking	Suggestible
Stern	Talkative
Tough	Unambitious

Sources: Leaper, 2013; Lippa, 2010.

Figure 1. Cultural Stereotypes of "masculine and "feminine" trait. (As cited in Rathus, 2015, p. 176)

The use of these adjectives in people’s language over the years, allowed the association to different activities depending on each sex. Actually, Carter (2014) talked about how a lot of roles and responsibilities in society are specific to only one gender such as cooking, doing the housework, or gardening (p. 246). He also remarked that:

When actors fulfill the expectations and scripts for these “gendered” tasks they are actually “doing gender”. Gender thus is something created and maintained in practice; doing a task associated with a specific gender creates and perpetuates meanings that define who one is and what it means to be a man or woman, or masculine or feminine (p. 246).

These sorts of characteristics lead to also stereotype activities for each sex, since they condition one’s capabilities to do certain tasks. For example, if being nurturing is a feminine quality -which is mostly attached to mothers-, then men would not be able to become fathers, as only women are supposed to possess this trait; or given that adventurous is a masculine

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characteristic, women are unable to do something risky like climbing Mount Everest because they are supposed to be cautious and fearful. This categorization fails to accurately describe all people, considering that a big amount of fathers are nurturing, and an important number of women have climbed Mount Everest, while still keeping their sexual identity.

Besides, Carter's views can be applied not only to regular behaviors or other kinds of activities people do, but to professions and jobs, to which society stereotypes and assigns a specific gender, even though it is not necessary, as any person with the required aptitudes and skills to perform a job, will do it regardless of the sex. In fact, Hind (2015) used a popular riddle as a way to exemplify how people tend to unconsciously attribute a determined sex to a profession:

A man and his son are in a dreadful car crash. Both are rushed to hospital, and the son is immediately sent to the operating theatre for life saving surgery. The surgeon enters and, horrified, exclaims, "I can't operate- he is my son!" How can that be, if the father was injured? It may be you spotted the answer straight away, but most people don't. The answer is simply that the surgeon is the boy's mother, but many people puzzle as they make the assumption that the surgeon will be male. (para. 7)

This example evidences that people, no matter from what generation they are, can subconsciously be biased in terms of gender stereotyping professions, and it does not necessarily have to do with someone being sexist or offensive when they make these kinds of assumptions; it is just how society in general -the media, the education received at home, school, friends, and other contexts-, portrays a specific idea of how an occupation should be, and when people perceive it (through any means), they grow up with it and become influenced by it. Therefore, a person can become unaware of these thoughts, as it is something they already have attached to their heads, and tend to match a profession with a specific sex without actually noticing it.

On the other hand, going into depth with the work area, the studies of Eccles & Hoffman (1984) and Stockard & Johnson (1992) stated that:

The gendered practices of familial, educational, peer and media subsystems are essentially replicated in organizational structures and practices. These include extensive segregation of jobs along gender lines, concentration of women in lower-level positions, inequitable wages, and limited opportunities for upper-level mobility and power imbalances in work relationships, which erect barriers to equitable participation in organizational activities (as cited in Bussey & Bandura, 1999, p.40).

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All these aspects become relevant in the work field for both sexes. For instance, the job searching process can be a setting to face stereotypes: women trying to get a job in “male fields” and vice versa might be a difficult situation, because some companies already know what they look for in an applicant; however, they expect a person from a determined sex to be the qualified one, and people from the opposite expected sex are not truly considered for the job. Actually, Brannon (2011) mentioned a study conducted by Uhlman and Cohen in 2005, discussing the processes people use to create certain requirements for hiring. The results pointed out that “people adjust their criteria for merit in a biased way that gives advantages to the group they favor” (p. 310).

It is also pertinent to note that people who are already working in a company do not have the chance to advance and move on to a better position, for the possibility that managers and bosses have fixed stereotyped ideas of their employees, and end up underestimating and denying them the opportunity to progress. This issue happens mostly to women, and researchers refer to it as the *sticky floor*. Matlin (2008) describes this phenomenon as “women who are in dead end jobs with a low percentage of promotion. Women who obtain a Sticky Floor job are more likely to remain in that specific job, never to be promoted or even really considered for a promotion” (p.222).

The previous situation is a sample of the struggle women have been gone through in the past years and still affects them now in the workplace. In the next section, it will be discussed a brief summary of the history of women’s battle for equality in job opportunities and better labor conditions.

History of women’s struggle for equal labor conditions

In the late years of the nineteenth century, work conditions for women were described by the Women in World History Curriculum (2013), as not safe or sanitary most of the times; education was left aside as the demand for work increased, and the life at home was affected because women had to work at the factories and simultaneously take care of the children and the chores when they returned home. Also, the wage gap started to appear: men had supervisory roles over women, earning a higher wage as a result. Considering the growth of the cash economy, women and children’s wages were necessary to support the needs of the whole family, and even though there were proposals to abolish child and female labor, some workers were against them as a consequence. (para. 3)

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Later, at the beginning of twentieth century labor situation changed dramatically. Goldin (2006) talked about the demand of office and clerk jobs, which rose because of new technologies between 1910 and 1930. In addition, the creation of part time jobs encouraged the participation of married women, whose husbands easily accepted and supported the fact their wives had a job. In the 50's the number of workingwomen increased almost a hundred per cent, nevertheless, they still were the secondary earners in the household and were meant to support their husbands. Around this decade, the high number of women going to college or studying different courses, helped them to be employed, however, that only meant to have a job but not a career (p. 5-7).

According to these early stages of women in the work field, it can be noted that up to that point, the changes that occurred were circumstantial, rather than a revolutionary initiative to transform the social order of that time. This helped to maintain the view of women as caretakers -for either her husband or her kids-, but anything beyond that, and to keep underestimating their abilities to work.

The 60's, on the other hand, did not go unnoticed, as the feminist movement originated a true change for women in the society. The E-Collaborative for Civic Education (ECCE) (2016) stated, "The feminist movement of the 1960s and '70s originally focused on dismantling workplace inequality, such as denial of access to better jobs and salary inequity, via anti-discrimination laws" (para. 4). This was the beginning of an exhaustive struggle -that still continues to these days-, to achieve equality and change society for the better. Women's attempt to break the stereotype to their professions failed at one point, since employers would offer them the same jobs, such as secretaries, teachers or nurses.

Furthermore, ECCE (2016) also identified the "Pill" as a key point on the revolutionary path for women:

What opened the door for women to pursue professional careers was access to the Pill — reliable oral contraception. Knowing that they could now complete years of training or study and launch their career without being interrupted by pregnancy, a wave of young women began applying to medical, law, and business schools in the early 1970s (para. 11).

The capability to decide what to do with one's body became a right for women as well, which brought a real change of mind in the society. This sexual revolution encouraged women to go out and pursue male dominant areas, and since employers viewed the possibility of getting

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pregnant as an impediment to hire women, the invention of the Pill ended with that “obstacle” and set the pace to the first steps to equality.

Even so, since the 70s, there have not been important changes in the work context; women still earn less than men, and the workforce is for the most part, male dominated. In 1970 49.5 million of workers were men, while 30.3 million were women, only in the United States of America. Nowadays data shows that in 2010, 81.3 million were men and 72.7 million were women (United States Census Bureau, 2010, p. 2). The wage gap between both sexes is still an issue in the USA as mentioned by Baig (2013), “The most recent numbers show that on average, women earn \$0.77 for every dollar earned by men. This may not be true for all women and certainly would depend on sectors and occupations” (para. 7).

Nowadays, women have more opportunities to work in different areas and it is a good option for companies, as it is demonstrated by Joy (2007), saying that efficiency is higher in companies where there are more women working than in those where men overtake in number in executive areas (as cited in Hind, 2015, para. 3); nonetheless, many difficulties and stereotypes are present when they perform the activities and tasks corresponding to their job.

One of the current problems is the gender stereotyping. For instance, being courageous is a common feature used to describe men, and women who are courageous are usually deemed as more aggressive or rude; however, this situation has two perspectives: women stereotyping in the way already mentioned, while men see this attitude becoming a courageous woman attractive (Jacobs & Schain, 2005, p.103). This means that stereotypes do not disappear, they continue to exist even in the group that is being stereotyped, thus the members of that group contribute to keep it around in the society.

Taking into account the stereotyping difficulty, the work of Oxfam (1991) made in the United States, shows the following analysis, “Women work 67% of the world’s working hours, 2 out of 3 of the world’s illiterate people are women, women’s earnings range from 50-85% of men’s earnings and globally women make up just over 10% of representatives in national government” (as cited in Reeves & Baden, 2000, p. 7).

This information indicates that discrimination is part of today’s order and the lack of representation of women in positions of power may be a determinant factor to attain equality. Perhaps, if more women even had the chance to more actively participate and have powerful

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input -from high justice positions, for example- in the decision making of important issues, such as the wage gap, maybe the situation could be a lot different than it is now.

However, even with the right policies, it can still be hard for some societies to break the gender stereotypes just yet. For example, Colombia “has strong laws in favor of women’s rights, political will and institutions that support gender equity. Last year, for example, law 1475 established a 30 percent quota of women candidates in all elections” (Maclaren & Salahub, 2013, para. 2).

Still, it has been said that problems as the gap between policy and funding and monitoring programs; the high rates of crime in some dangerous zones of the country, where laws fail to fully protect women and men; and the internal bad view afro-descendant and indigenous women have (Maclaren & Salahub, 2013, para. 6) affect the right development towards an equal society in the country. Especially the part regarding the ethnic and racial discrimination, highlighting that being a male with any of these traits already has a difficult time to make it in a society, then how is it going to be for indigenous or afro-descendant women? Issues of intolerance and superiority complexes are damaging the balance of communities and need to be dealt with in a stronger way.

Conversely, Lune (2013) briefly described the changes women have had in the work force in Colombia:

Today, just over half of the female population participates in the Colombian labor force; however, the wage gap still has a staggering 25% to 35% disparity compared to their male counterparts. With more than 11 million female professionals in the work force, the success of the Colombian transformations yielded a considerable increase from the 19% of women that participated 50-60 years earlier. (p. 2)

Things look better compared to the overview of many decades ago, when women had up to 10 or 15 children, and dedicated themselves full time to take care of them and the domestic chores; so it is good to notice that many women are attending college, getting an education and have a career now. However, social expectations to still being the responsible ones for the care of the kids are holding them back, creating a large disparity between both sexes (Lune, 2013, p.3), in which men are the ones who get to be successful and do not have to worry that much about the kids, because parenting and home tasks are seen as female activities.

Conclusions

Throughout this document, it is noticeable the existence of gender roles that condition the behavior of people in all societies from a long time ago. These roles had classified qualities into feminine and masculine (genders), causing prejudices when meeting other people. This situation is not appropriate in any context, as a human being is unique and can possess features that are typically associated to his or her opposite sex. It is wrong to assume that a person has to be and behave in a certain way to fit in the society and feel less of a man or a woman for getting into certain fields of work. Moreover, it is not necessary to make the division of professions for men and women; anyone can study and prepare for the career they want and like, without feeling judged or insecure about it. The question about why these activities and professions have to be distributed among men and women is open to discussion and can be addressed in detail in further works.

Furthermore, in the actual work environment, employers having a preconceived idea of an applicant can generate bias in the selection process. And the same time, other people who want to apply to the job, will not even attempt to do so, because they feel like they would be rejected, -which is in fact another stereotyped thought. Therefore, it is key to have an open mind when hiring new employees, and to lose the fear of trying and going to an interview (considering of course, that the candidates feel confident and qualified for the position) regardless of what the established ideas of the situation. The outcome may be a pleasant surprise for the both parts and if it is not, then at least they made an effort to refute the validity of the stereotype.

In spite of the big struggle women had had to face during all this time and the accomplishment they have achieved up to this moment (right to vote, to study, and having a job at the same level as men) there are many issues that need to be changed in order to conquer a true equality between sexes. The wage difference favoring men, gender violence, sexual harassment and sexism (in both men and women) are obstacles that must be overcome, by raising awareness of the value of women and how much they can achieve if they trust in their abilities and stand up to their beliefs.

Finally, the main goal for the society is to break stereotyped ideas about people and their conducts, but in the process, even more generalized concepts of each sex come up, thus making the battle for having the same liberties and privileges harder to fight. People need to educate themselves more and be more aware of the changing world they live right now, acknowledging

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people's true abilities. At the same time, the government should enforce gender equal reforms that motivate women's participation in more work areas, and equal earnings for both sexes. Perhaps this process of generalizing and/or stereotyping is inherent in each human being since birth, but in order to actually confirm or deny this hypothesis, more in depth studies, involving psychological factors, should be conducted in other investigations.

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Appendix A

Literary Review Map

