



“BECAUSE SHE IS A WOMAN”: NARRATIVES AROUND CAREER AND SUCCESS

COMMITTEE FOR MANAGING GENDER ISSUES



WSJ Graphics: LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co. study

GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION: II

In an attempt to break the ice on how gender manifests itself on multiple levels in the institution, to begin the not-so-comfortable conversations amongst peers and to build solidarities amongst those who feel similarly, we had in-depth conversations with students from IIM-A to understand and capture their lived experiences as (female) students around the campus. Inspired by these conversations, we launch a series of newsletters on “gendered experiences of higher education.” Each newsletter, as part of this series, will focus on themes identified from our in-depth interviews with the students, emphasising on the world-view of women, of their life at campus, as they live, see and experience it. This is the second in the series. You can access the first from [here](#).

“First-person accounts of experience are indispensable, not only for a [politics] of interest based on shared identity, but for a [politics] of solidarity based on recognition and sympathy. The evidence of experience crucially makes collective [...] action possible by allowing us not only to identify with other people, but to dis-identify from the singularity of our own position.”

- Johanna Oksala, 2014

“It is her face”

“It is because she is a girl”

“The company just wanted to increase diversity and improve their gender ratio”

“It is because her boyfriend is _____”

“Did you see that picture on her Instagram from a couple of years ago? I am sure that is probably why.”

These are just some of the comments that our respondents have heard. One of our respondents was indeed asked not to take career related advice from her female mentor because *apparently* she did not know anything, despite her mentor being placed successfully in a good company. Our female respondents feel that if a woman is successful, her gender is almost always attached to her triumph, her good grades are attributed to her boyfriend, her physical appearance to her PPO and job offer; no matter how hardworking or smart or intelligent she is.

Organisations often become a realm wherein there is a reproduction and invention of socially constructed and culturally disseminated ideas of gender. Joan Acker (1990)¹ in her theory of gendered organisations argues that gender inequality is built or rather structured into the very processes of work organisations, characterising jobs with long term insecurities, standardised career ladders and job descriptions, and management control evaluations. Moreover, the supposedly gender neutral control systems are structured upon an abstract male figure, thus concealing a gendered system. Definitions of a ‘job’ or of a ‘universal worker’ often contain an implicit preference for the male worker since they come with fewer distractions outside of work, unlike women with primary care work responsibilities. The creation of this image of an ideal, abstract worker in order to determine job value and hierarchy is based on the reality that this abstract worker is very much based on the male worker. The use of this apparently abstract worker justifies the exclusion or conformity to low-level jobs of women (Ibid). To contextualise, there are only 29 per cent women in senior management positions worldwide (IBR, 2020)².

Not only structurally, but women are disadvantaged socially as well. Apart from the very evident structural deterrents of success for a woman in her career advancement, what also exerts influence are the social imaginations of and biases towards a successful woman. These gender stereotypes inform occupational behaviour and assumptions in the workplace with patriarchal expectations, negatively impacting career progressions of and self-esteem in women, to name a couple.

¹Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158.

² https://www.grantthornton.global/globalassets/1.-member-firms/global/insights/women-in-business/2020/women-in-business-2020_report.pdf

Acker's theory also extends into gender bias and hiring research wherein men are more preferred to be hired than women prompting hiring discrimination (see Weichselbaumer, 2003³; Carlsson, 2011⁴; Chan and Wang, 2018⁵; van Esch, Hopkins, et al. 2018⁶) due to multiple factors including the risk of sexual harassment if women are hired (Hart, 2019⁷). The penalties of what are believed to be causal factors of hiring discrimination are largely borne by women and sexual minorities (see Ahmed, et al. 2013⁸; Bryant-Lees and Kite, 2020⁹). The hiring discrimination together with feminisation of certain kind of professions and occupations give rise to skewed gender ratios, devaluation of work predominantly done by women and gender pay gaps (see Standing, 1999¹⁰; Dwyer, 2013¹¹; Mondal, et al. 2018¹²).

Another unintended consequent of such biases and stereotypes is women feeling uncomfortable to work in male-dominated professions, organisations and teams (see Burgess, et al. 2005¹³; Barnad and Martin, 2013¹⁴; Gaines, 2017¹⁵; Campuzano, 2019¹⁶) because of the sheer expressions of masculinity, amplifying gender based discrimination, the threat of sexual harassment, psychological abuse and trauma, etc. to name a few. Our respondents also vocalised observed patterns in opting for electives and their probable relation to gender. They narrated incidents in which their female batchmates would not even consider sitting for certain companies owing to the domination of men in the field. In addition to it being a cause of unease, the respondents have also opined that the burden of being the first or amongst the few women in these fields and organisations is an intense affair, subsequently rendering many seemingly equal opportunities inaccessible to women.

³Weichselbaumer, D. (2003). Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Hiring. *Labour Economics*, 10(6), 629-642.

⁴Carlsson M. (2011). Does Hiring Discrimination Cause Gender Segregation in the Swedish Labor Market? *Feminist Economics*, 17(3), 71-102.

⁵Chan, J., Wang J. (2018). Hiring Preferences in Online Labor Markets: Evidence of a Female Hiring Bias. *Management Science*, 64(7), 2973-2994.

⁶van Esch, C., Hopkins, M.M., O'Neil, D.A., & Bilimoria, D. (2018). How perceived riskiness influences the selection of women and men as senior leaders. *Human Resource Management*, 57(4), 915-930.

⁷Hart, C.G. (2019). The Penalties For Self-Reporting Sexual Harassment. *Gender & Society*, 33(4), 534-559.

⁸Ahmed, A.M., Andersson L. and Hammarstedt, M. (2013). Are Gay Men and Lesbians Discriminated against in the Hiring Process? *Southern Economic Journal*, 79(3), 565-585.

⁹Bryant-Lees, K.B. and Kite, M.E. (2020), "Evaluations of LGBT job applicants: consequences of applying "out". " *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, ahead-of-print.

¹⁰Standing, G. (1999). Global Feminization Through Flexible Labor: A Theme Revisited. *World Development*, 27(3), 583-602.

¹¹Dwyer R.E. (2013). The Care Economy? Gender, Economic Restructuring, and Job Polarization in the U.S. Labor Market. *American Sociological Review*, 78(3), 390-416.

¹²Mondal, B., Ghosh, J., Chakraborty, S., and Mitra, S. (2018). "Women Workers in India – Labour Force Trends, Occupational Diversification, and Wage Gaps.", Centre for Sustainable Employment Working Paper #3, Azim Premji University.

¹³Burgess, J., Henderson, L., & Strachan, G. (2005). Women Workers in Male Dominated Industrial Manufacturing Organisations: Contrasting Workplace Case Studies from Australia. *Management Revue*, 16(4), 458-474.

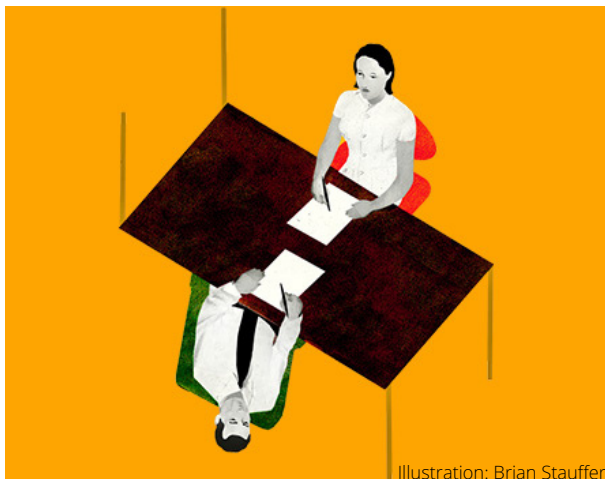
¹⁴Martin, P., & Barnard, A. (2013). The experience of women in male-dominated occupations: A constructivist grounded theory inquiry. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 39(2).

¹⁵Gaines, J. (2017). Women in Male-Dominated Careers. *Cornell HR Review*.

¹⁶Campuzano, M. V. (2019). Force and Inertia: A Systematic Review of Women's Leadership in Male-Dominated Organizational Cultures in the United States. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(4), 437-469.

“The emotional cost and the struggle is just not worth the higher pay and status. After toiling so hard here, we would want to work in a place with relatively fewer prejudices and discrimination”, a respondent asserted.

The recent attempts by organisations to tackle the hiring discrimination and gender ratios, however, generated different kind of stereotypes and discrimination. Although, the practices of women being treated as sexual objects, and the idea of them owing sexual favours to men higher in the hierarchy in order to secure employment and promotions amounting to sexual harassment is not never heard of, negative stereotypes surrounding the belief that organisations surrender to affirmative action seem to be now rampant. This assumption only deepens and reinforces the imposter syndrome women are socially conditioned into since childhood, i.e., the inability to believe that her success is deserved or legitimately achieved as a result of her skills and efforts. Studies, in fact, show that the prevalence of imposter syndrome is very high amongst professional women and is said to be one of the causal factors as to why women are not able to reap the benefits of their professional success. For instance, a recent study by KPMG, "Advancing the Future of Women in Business: The 2020 KPMG Women's Leadership Summit Report"¹⁷ finds that 72 percent of women executives across industries have experienced imposter syndrome in their careers. This results in women over-working to prove their worth and taking extra measures to succeed. In the same study by KPMG, it was also revealed that 81 percent of the women put more pressure on themselves to not fail than men do. Such feelings are not alien to women on our campus. The respondents note that they (women) often end up over-working in team projects and have to make peace with no acknowledgement of their contributions and due-credit to their work.



“After listening to it enough times, we begin to believe we are undeserving and unworthy of everything we have achieved. We cast doubt on ourselves and this seeps to literally all spheres of our lives. The damage is irreparable”, shared a student.

What is more, all our female respondents mention that the language and demeanour of male classmates and seniors feels very condescending when it comes to their placements and careers. *“They just dismiss our anxiety and stress regarding placements. They think we have it easy while they have to slog. It is misplaced [passive] aggression”, another student spoke, quite agitatedly.*

¹⁷<https://womensleadership.kpmg.us/content/dam/womensleadership/pdf/2020/2020wlsstudy.pdf>

The respondents also expressed concern on their fellow (male) batchmates with similar regressive ideas and stereotypes of their female colleagues, going on to take up managerial positions, further contributing to the male-dominated toxic work-cultures and gender based discrimination. The respondents further point to the fact that if anyone spoke up or called these stereotypes and biases out, they would be tagged as the “feminist-type” who no one wants to associate with, consequentially tampering one’s networks, placements, and ultimately one’s career. On similar lines, research studies within organisational literature call attention to the network systems being more stronger, effective and readily accessible to men more than women amplifying due benefits in favour of men (see Magno and Weber, 2014¹⁸; Greguletz, et al. 2018¹⁹; Blommaert, et al. 2019²⁰; Mengel, 2020²¹). [LinkedIn](#) (2020) in their analysis of data from their platform confirms the network gap and note that women are less likely to have stronger networks. In fact, Williams, Muller and Kilanski (2012)²² extend Acker’s theory of gendered organisations (1990) to career maps, teamwork and networking focusing on how each of these are highly gendered and reproduce gender disparities.

Such are the narratives around a woman’s merit, performance, success, and careers that informs the lived experiences and world views of women on campus. A more empathetic and accountable behaviour from each one of us can truly help limiting such unfortunate and unhealthy experiences for women in our campuses and fields. Though much is to be done, there has been a considerable decline in gender-related barriers and biases deterring the progression of a woman’s career, over the years, increasing female participation in the world of work. This, in turn, can minimise issues, especially those which aid the skewed gender ratios. For instance, [Gap Inc.](#), for the third consecutive year, is included in the [Bloomberg Gender-Equality Index](#), marking it as one of the global industry leaders in gender equality. “At Gap Inc. leading the industry in gender equality means that, not only is Gap Inc. a great place to work for all genders, but that we practice and promote gender equality practices in all aspects of our business – in our supply chain and surrounding communities through programs like P.A.C.E., and our supplier diversity program, and through efforts to influence the rest of the industry to follow suit.”, asserts Melina Wyatt, Senior Manager, P.A.C.E. Operations and Partnerships and leader of Gap Inc.’s Women in Leadership networking group. In other words, actively making an effort to correct the gender inequality across the ecosystem of an organisation or a workplace can help reduce the inequities across genders and sexualities and bring about an inclusive structural and social change.

¹⁸Magno G., Weber I. (2014) International Gender Differences and Gaps in Online Social Networks. In: Aiello L.M., McFarland D. (eds) Social Informatics. SocInfo 2014. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 8851. Springer, Cham.

¹⁹Greguletz, E., Diehl, M.-R., & Kreutzer, K. (2019). Why women build less effective networks than men: The role of structural exclusion and personal hesitation. *Human Relations*, 72(7), 1234–1261.

²⁰Blommaert, L., Meuleman, R., Leenheer, S., & Butkēviča, A. (2020). The gender gap in job authority: Do social network resources matter? *Acta Sociologica*, 63(4), 381–399.

²¹Mengel, F. (2020). Gender Differences in Networking. *The Economic Journal*, 130(630), 1842–1873.

²²Williams, C. L., Muller, C., & Kilanski, K. (2012). Gendered Organizations in the New Economy. *Gender & Society*, 26(4), 549–573.