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## **Making a Difference through Research**

## **Demystifying Gender Bias Intensity in Service Based Organizations**

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**Abstract**

Gender inequality and the value of gender diversity are widely acknowledged in the literature. Women experience organizational barriers relative to their success; yet, there are clear links between increases in representation of women in leadership roles to increases in financial results. As service based industries seek for a competitive means in a highly saturated and differentiated market, organizations should not neglect moving women to the top of their strategy focus and activities. Accordingly, this research investigated the intensity of gender bias in service based industries by functional area and examined the linkages between gender, gender bias, leadership rank, and equal opportunity measures to support organizations in using gender as a competitive strategy. This research was conducted with 138 participants and revealed gender bias as a complicated manifestation explained through the lens of Pluralistic Ignorance. Findings of this study demonstrate more women than men experienced gender bias despite both genders reporting equality in the workplace. This research contributes to understanding gender bias intensity factors, with the acknowledgement of Pluralistic Ignorance to explain contrary data, to promote organizational awareness and direct efforts.

**Key Words:** gender, gender bias, gender stereotype, gender stigma, pluralistic ignorance, work environment, women, diversity, human resources

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender inequality and the value of gender diversity are widely acknowledged in the literature. Despite links between women and increases in financial results, gender bias is routinely overlooked and minimalized. Although there have been improvements between the wage disparity amongst men and women, the glass ceiling continues to triumph with the support of several other barriers to the success of women. As service intense organizations seek for a competitive strategy to combat a highly saturated and differentiated market as well as the growing proportion of women spending contribution, organizations need to focus on increasing organizational gender balance and leverage women talent. Research has investigated and explored the relationships between women and men and the impact of gender from the perspective of leader and subordinate and the glass ceiling phenomenon. Women leadership has also been contextualized and compared to that of men in the hotel, gaming, and food and beverage segment. However, there is a significant gap in the literature that omits comparatively understanding the manifestation and impact of gender bias across traditional service-based disciplines. The results of this study indicate a marginal relationship between perceived gender of a leader to subordinate and low acknowledgement of organizational and leader reinforcement of gender bias despite reports of its existence. This study identified contrary positions on the perceptions of gender bias held by men and women.

**ABBREIVATED LITERATURE REVIEW**

organizations must build a diverse environment, realizing that this can only be accomplished when women participate in all levels of management allowing talent to come together regardless of gender differences to affect business decisions (Evans, 2011). Organizations need to develop and promote change to the damaging impact of gender stereotyping and remove this barrier of bottom line performance potential through increasing gender balance in their organization (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011). Clear links to the increased representation of women has already demonstrated positive bottom line results supporting the belief that women drive performance and contribute to an organization’s competitive resources (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011; Miller & Sisk, 2012).

Women find themselves trapped in leadership, gender stigmas. Women leaders face higher standards than male leaders and are rewarded less. Women that exhibit traditionally valued masculine leadership behaviors such as assertiveness are perceived as competent but are not well liked while women that exhibit more feminine, stereotypical behaviors are more well liked and perceived as not having the necessary or valued leadership skills to strategically improve the performance of the organization (Evans, 2011). Organizations hold a common belief that masculine leadership characteristics, particularly those related to business acumen and influence, result in better performance while feminine styles of management are evaluated as deficient (Evans, 2011; Miller & Sisk, 2012). Although leadership characteristics and styles between men and women are marginally different, women tend to have higher interpersonal behaviors and are more oriented to demonstrate collaborative and inclusive approaches to support and maintain relationships as compared to men (Blayney & Blotnicky, 2010; Evans, 2011).

In the development of an organizational strategy targeting the retention and promotion of women, there have been examples of success and the value of women leadership. These strategies have included developing a culture of retention and recruitment, increasing the number of women in all levels of roles, particularly leadership roles, recognizing women’s successes, and enhancing professional development opportunities (Evans, 2011). Unless organizations take immediate action to address gender bias, organizations will be unable to attract and retain talented women to compete in the market.

**Clarifying the Nature and Meaning of Pluralistic Ignorance**

In the world of Sociology, the existence of Pluralistic Ignorance has been of great interest as a result of its consequences for employees and organizations. This social phenomenon is defined as the circumstance in which individuals infer that the perceptions, beliefs, and feelings guiding their own actions differ or are opposite from those guiding the identical actions of their peers (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). This is likely to occur when peers are gathered together and may explain why group members often refrain from discussing their ultimate concerns with each other (Grant, O’Neil, & Stephens, 2009). This is due to group members’ lack of mutual visibility, misreading of behavioral cues by members of a reference group, or taking individual’s public behavior as diagnostic of their private thoughts and feelings (Grant, O’Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002)

For an organization, this is important when considering the existence of gender bias as Pluralistic Ignorance can lead to an employee feeling deviant from his or her work group or the organization, reducing retention (Halbesleben, 2009). If employees experience Pluralistic Ignorance, the deviance they experience threatens their social identity; by hiding their true opinion and outwardly supporting the perceived group norm, they can appear as though they fit in with others (Halbesleben, 2009) which may increase the longevity and existence of gender bias and discrimination in the workplace.

A consideration worthy in this study is to acknowledge within the bounds of Pluralistic Ignorance, if women feel that a majority of men are comfortable with the current environment, then they are more likely to accept the situation and even fail to report any experiences or concern. Additionally, fear, such as the fear of embarrassment of the individual or someone else, the fear of being materially exploited, and the fear of change or uncertainty—can produce avoidance behavior and hence contribute to Pluralistic Ignorance (Miller & Nelson, 2002). As such, individuals inadvertently create spirals of silence and avoidance (Grant, O’Neil, & Stephens, 2009).

**METHODOLOGY**

This study used a survey as a measurement instrument with Institutional Review Board approval. A 32-question survey was informed by the literature and developed. The respondents were asked to rate the degree of their agreement or disagreement to a number of statements associated with experiencing gender bias and organizational culture in an attempt to answer the research hypotheses. Specifically, the survey utilized a five-point Likert Scale with the exception of questions asking the respondents to select their level within the organization, the gender of their direct supervisor, and demographic information. The Likert Scale ratings included the following options: strongly agree, agree, neutral/neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The survey was deployed using Surveymonkey.com and shared via social media networks including Facebook and Linkedin.

**TABLE 1**

**RESPONDENTS BY INDUSTRY AREA**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Industry | Count | Percentage |
| Retail | 6 | 4.38% |
| Casino/Gaming | 56 | 40.88% |
| Food and Beverage | 28 | 20.44% |
| Hotel | 14 | 10.22% |
| Other | 33 | 24.09% |

**TABLE 2**

**RESPONDENTS BY FUNCTIONAL AREA**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Functional Area | Count | Percentage |
| Accounting | 4 | 2.9% |
| Administrative | 6 | 4.35% |
| Customer Service | 23 | 16.67% |
| Marketing | 8 | 5.8% |
| Operations | 18 | 13.04% |
| Human Resources | 37 | 26.81% |
| Sales | 8 | 5.8% |
| Finance | 6 | 4.35% |
| Legal | 0 | 0% |
| IT | 4 | 2.9% |
| Engineering | 0 | 0% |
| Product | 1 | 0.72% |
| Research and Development | 0 | 0% |
| International | 0 | 0% |
| Business Intelligence | 1 | 0.72% |
| Manufacturing | 0 | 0% |
| Public Relations | 2 | 1.45% |
| Other | 20 | 14.49% |

**FINDINGS**

A high percentage of men and women perceived gender equality in the workplace. 85.7% of men and 68.2% of women responded that their work is valued equally regardless of their gender. Similarly, 75% of men and 59.7% of women responded that they have equal access to opportunities, including promotion, regardless of their gender. Despite this perception of equality, 47.3% of women reported experiencing gender bias, defined in the survey as being treated differently than a woman or man counterpart and 50% of women reported the existence of salary gaps among men and women at the same level in their organization. This contrary data creates a paradox between perception and experience among women.

Men in the study had a more positive perception of workplace equality and reported a lesser percentage of experienced gender bias.

A slightly higher percentage of respondents with women leaders perceived equality in the workplace compared to those with male leaders. 84.3% of respondents with female leaders indicated that their direct supervisor does not consider gender in task assignments compared to 73.1% of respondents with male leaders. The results were similar regarding the perception of equal opportunity and work being valued equally. 64.7% of respondents with female leaders compared to 61.5% of those with male leaders reported having equal opportunity and 73.1% of respondents with female leaders compared to 70.5% with male leaders reported that their work was valued equally.

Among respondents in this study, the highest percentage of respondents who experienced bias were at the highest levels of management. 51.4% of respondents at the senior management level and 46.2% at the owner/executive level reported experiencing bias compared to only 24% at the entry level. Similarly, 60% at the level of senior management and 46.2% at the owner/executive level identified salary gaps, compared to only 28% at the entry level. The perception/experience paradox is most apparent at the owner/executive level where despite a high percentage of people experiencing bias, 84.6% reported work being valued equally and 76.9% reported equal opportunity between genders.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

It is known that women experience barriers in the workplace relative to gender. The degree and significance varies; however, common themes include lack of access to projects, value of work, salary, and after work activities are the top barriers to success. Additionally, with the acknowledgement and lens of Pluralistic Ignorance, an additional and intangible barrier presents itself in the workplace.

The gender of a direct supervisor impacts equal opportunity for women, it is perceived that the gender of an individual’s direct supervisor does not have a significant effect on equality opportunity. Men and women both reported equality in equal opportunity related questions and reported equal access to opportunities, including promotion, regardless of their gender. Despite this response data, nearly half of all women respondents reported experiencing gender bias, defined in the survey as being treated differently than a woman or man counterpart. There is a clear gap in the perception of respondents and their report of having experienced gender bias.

Evidence of Pluralistic Ignorance was demonstrated by contrary respondent data and paradoxal trends in which patterns in the data directly linked to group members’ lack of mutual visibility, misreading of behavioral cues by members of a reference group, and taking individual’s public behavior as diagnostic of their private thoughts and feelings as supported by the literature (Grant, O’Neil, & Stephens, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002). Reporting in this research study is similar to Pluralistic Ignorance studies surrounding sexual harassment in which individuals convey to others implicit support for behaviors, actions, and the organization culture in question, ultimately limiting reporting of such situations and creating avoidance of the topic all together (Halbesleben, 2009; Miller & Nelson, 2002).

Gender bias intensity varies by functional area and leadership level, there is variation in gender bias intensity by functional area. Traditionally male dominated areas, such as Finance and Accounting, demonstrate the highest reported gender bias areas. Accordingly, traditionally female dominated areas like Customer Service received the lowest reported gender bias experiences. The identification of intensity by functional area supports the need to inform and educate the existing workforce and address organization’s culture and norms that may be the result or effect of Pluralistic Ignorance.

The lack of acknowledgement of the existence of gender bias by men and by the highest levels of management is concerning. More men than women are in higher level management positions. If individuals in higher leader levels with authority and power to positively impact equality in the workplace do not see this inequality, this will impede efforts to change it. Although there are limitations of this study including sample size, geographic location of respondents, and further evaluation of additional variables such as leadership behavior and organizational structure, this study contributes to existing literature by clarifying linkages between gender, gender bias, leadership rank, and specific industry functions by exposing the dynamism and relationship among these considerations as well as the impact of Pluralistic Ignorance.

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