

# The Psycho-Cultural Analysis of Sex Discrimination

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**Abstract:** A patriarchal society allocates roles to its members on the basis of sex which are the set of expectations defined by it. These roles specify what traits are to be acquired by men and women with certain sex-specific personality attributes called masculine and feminine. Masculinity is associated with instrumental orientation, whereas femininity with affective orientation, as a result of which males and females develop such dispositional characteristics in their daily life activities. Males outperform females in problem-solving task as their main focus is getting the job done; females do better in social tasks requiring sociability, submissiveness and sociability, the offshoot of which is fear of success which means that females lower their performance as a fear of deviance from sex role standards by conforming to socially accepted values internalized in early years. Other resultant factors are attitudinal where females are evaluated negatively. The present study is an attempt to focus on certain psychological and cultural factors which are associated with sex discrimination and resultant poor performance of females or their inability to give in their best where there is a possibility otherwise.

**Key Words:** Sex differences; Psycho-social dimensions; Male stereotype; Female stereotype

Why women are considered "the other" or universally "the second sex"? More than half of the world's population is female. Yet despite this fact, in many cultures, females have been treated like a minority. They have been excluded from economic and political powers; they have been the subject of strong negative stereotypes and they have faced overt discrimination in many areas of life-work settings, higher education, government etc. (Fisher, 1992 and Heilman, Block & Lucas, 1992). Though, this situation is changing at least in some countries and to some degree, still prejudices based on gender continue to exert harmful effects upon females in many countries. There are certain psycho-social dimensions to gender discrimination which are subtle but often deadly (Kanekar, Kolsawalla & Nazareth, 1988). These are sex role orientation, fear of

success and attitude of society as taken for discussion below:

## Sex Roles Allocation

Adult roles are assigned by the society on the basis of sex. These sex roles are the set of expectations defined by a particular society, that indicate what is appropriate for men and women with certain sex-specific personality attributes called masculine and feminine (Bem, 1974, 81, 93; Walsh, 87) where masculinity is associated with instrumental (task) orientation and femininity with interpersonal orientation and they tend to behave in this likely manner in their daily life activities. Following are the characteristics of the male and female stereotypes according to *Bem Sex Role Inventory*:

### Characteristics of the Male Stereotype

1. Act as a leader
2. Aggressive
3. Ambitious
4. Analytical
5. Assertive
6. Athletic
7. Competitive
8. Defends own beliefs
9. Dominant
10. Forceful
11. Has leadership abilities
12. Independent
13. Individualistic

### Characteristics of the Female Stereotype

1. Affectionate
2. Cheerful
3. Child like
4. Compassionate
5. Does not use harsh language
6. Eager to soothe hurt feeling
7. Feminine
8. Flatterable
9. Gentle
10. Gullible
11. Loves children
12. Loyal
13. Sensitive to the needs of others

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|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 14. Makes decision easily   | 14. Shy           |
| 15. Masculine               | 15. Soft spoken   |
| 16. Self reliant            | 16. Sympathetic   |
| 17. Self sufficient         | 17. Tender        |
| 18. Strong personality      | 18. Understanding |
| 19. Willing to take a stand | 19. Warm          |
| 20. Willing to take risks   | 20. Yielding      |

Virtually, all societies assign men and women to somewhat different roles and occupations. Men are more often employed outside the home, while women are more likely to be responsible for home and family. Employee roles demand the kinds of traits— tasks orientation, assertiveness, rationality— that characterize the traditional male stereotype. In contrast, the role of homemaker requires those qualities— sensitivity, warmth, gentleness that characterize the female stereotype (Eagly, 1987 and Eagly and Steffen, 1984). On the basis of the sex roles, one may conclude that men are by nature task-oriented and women are oriented interpersonally. And according to the traditional model of sex-role orientation, deviation from sanctioned sex-role behaviours are considered maladaptive. But there is another type also where some people are high on both masculine and feminine traits called “androgynous.” That is, they behave in ways identified as masculine, feminine, androgynous, or none of these. Much of the research on gender and gender roles has focused on androgyny and the assumption is often made that an androgynous role is preferable to either male or female gender-typed role. Many past studies were consistent with the proposition that androgynous individual is good in accommodation and mental health as compared to gender typed individuals, androgynous men and women were found to be better liked, better adjusted and more adaptable to situation demands, more flexible in coping with stress, more comfortable with their sexuality; more satisfied interpersonally and in an elderly sample both were satisfied with their lives (Feingold, 1994 and Garnets & Pleck, 1979). Strong adherence to traditional gender role is often found to be associated with gender schemas and negative consequences. For example men who identify the extreme masculine role behave more violently and aggressively than men who perceive themselves as being feminine.

### **Fear of Achievement**

This is a psychological dimension/factor which is a subsidiary product of cultural norms of sex-role appropriate conduct and is a natural consequence of the endemic condition of female life rooted in the contradictions of social structure and the pervasive ideology of female inferiority. It is a stable latent disposition, acquired early in life as a part of sex-role socialization. Fear of success is also known as “success anxiety” i.e. the motive to avoid success where the females lower their performance as a fear of deviance from sex-role standards and thus conform to socially accepted values absorbed in their minds in early years (Horner, 1968). Fear of success is

a form of anxiety which comes into play when women compete with men or when they envisage that their performance will shade into conflict with men. Horner (1968) suggested that most women have disposition to become anxious about achieving success because they expect negative consequences such as social rejection and/or feeling of being unfeminine as a result of succeeding. Horner's (1968) study examined the effect of the motive to avoid success on performance under conditions in which the motive was aroused. In the first session subjects responded to several verbal cues of TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) nature and performed number of tasks. Subjects worked in large mixed sex groups. The motive to avoid success was inferred from stories written in response to the following verbal cue: “After the first term finals Anne (John) finds herself (himself) at the top of her (his) medical school class.” Females responded to Anne cue and males to John cue. Females' fear of success stories were characterized by three major themes: social rejection, concern with one's normality and femininity and denial of bizarre responses. In the second session subjects were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions; a non-competitive condition in which the subjects worked by themselves, a mixed sex competitive condition.

The results showed that females whose stories showed fear of success performed better in non-competitive than the competitive situation while females whose stories did not show fear of success performed better in competitive situation. Because of the conflict between success and femininity, females with high fear of success were assumed to be inhibited in their performance in achievement oriented tasks. In fact, Horner (1972, 1974) suggested that while men become unsexed by failure, women become unsexed by success. Condry and Dyer (1974) and Shapiro (1979) also suggested that fear of success may be conceptualized as a fear of deviance from sex-role standards. Sehgal, (1990) and Kapila, (1992) also found that females' achievement on variety of problem solving tasks get hampered due to fear of success that might threaten her femininity and results in social rejection as compared to their masculine counterparts. Mead (1949), observed that a female had two choices either she proclaimed herself as a woman and therefore, less on achieving individuality or an achieving individual and therefore, less a woman. Miller (1976) says that female underlies her accomplishment so that she may not inflame the male ego.

### **Socio-cultural Norms**

Traditionally, all societies generally hold unfavourable attitude towards the female members. It does not hold them in equally high regard and do not evaluate them as favorably and positively as men. This is true of the whole world including Asian, Eastern and Western countries. The concept of male superiority and female inferiority has a long history. Indian and Western society are no exception to this like all, or almost all developed societies in the modern world. A male-dominated society is the society where the women's place has been primarily confined to the home, her role limited to procreation, upbringing of children and catering for the needs of men folk by way of creative comforts.

In the Jeo-Christian tradition, men were originally identified as the owners of their families. In the Jewish Talmud, categories of property included cattle, women and slaves. In the New Testament, Ephesians (5: 22-24) instruct Christian women as follows: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church." Females are generally looked down upon by their male counterparts and are treated unfairly in all the spheres of life. They are taken lightly by the males in all walks of life even where they outdo them. Not only this, they are considered inferiors and are accorded lower importance in terms of ability and quality and are discriminated against men who are given due weightage since the very beginning of life through socialization practices (Oetzel, 1966, Kaushik & Malhotra, 1997 and Malhotra and Sharma, 2001). Right from birth differential treatment is meted out to the boy and girl. A boy born after even half a dozen boys is still welcome but a girl born after the same half a dozen boys is accepted with a slight whimper. According to Altekhar (1983), even Atharva Veda contains charms and rituals to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter. The process of rejecting a female child starts in many cases before birth with female foeticide. If by some strange miracle the female baby survives, she is tolerated but never allowed to develop at the expense of her brothers (Mascarenhas, 1988). This attitude of rejection has a negative impact on the female psyche and growth of their personality.

Not only this, the parents also use double standards and different codes of rearing a boy and a girl. Gender role adoption gets defined, role preference expectation and ability also distinguished. In terms of food, clothing, social contacts, responsibility of household and development of personality, the girl is taught and reared differently from a boy. They are denied special privileges of education, autonomy and are also deprived of food having nutritious value. Once a child is born the cycle of under-nutrition begins. The female infants are breastfed very less and at longer intervals than boys. As young children, girls along with their mothers eat last, hence the least. Females are only valued as housewives and mothers but not as competitors, and by this a society (male dominating) makes a female lose her identity and prod her on to become a shadow of man, thus lowering her status for ever. Female

with lack of identity neither can grow herself, nor can help others grow. The hand that rocks the cradle must have strength, courage and will.

Thus to conclude, the net result is glass-ceiling where females as a group are prevented from the top positions in work place due to artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias. Therefore, for women to become a vital force in their societies, change will have to be brought in their rearing practices.

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