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The Persistence of Gender-blind Phenomena in Indian Science Academia

By Tanu Shukla¹, Madhurima Das², Virendra Singh Nirban³

Abstract

Using the theoretical tool of gender-blind sexism, an extension of Bonilla Silva's (2003) color-blind racism, the current study explores the key determinants which are responsible for discrimination of women in science disciplines in Indian higher education. We argue that gender-blind sexism demonstrates how gender discrimination operates as institutional tools to discriminate between men and women in science fields. Although the science stream proclaims gender neutrality/blindness, it ultimately disfavors women over men. This study with the aid of extensive in-depth face-to-face interviews, aims to recognize the pattern accountable for women's reduced progress in the sciences. Against the backdrop of the recently framed National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, by the Government of India, this intensive qualitative study identifies certain crucial dimensions responsible for gender discrimination and diminishing participation of females in Indian academia, especially in the sciences. With several institutional policies that have been in place to mitigate challenges in overt sexist patterns in the workplace, the analysis still confirms the existence of a perceivable organizational barrier, which hinders the rise of women faculty members. We infer that gender discrimination operates through covert mechanisms of gender-blindness and such practices are normalized institutionally as a brand-new form of sexism.

Keywords: Gender-blind sexism, Women in science, Indian Higher Education, Dual burden, Stagnant careers, Stereotyping performance, Organizational attitudes

Introduction

Inequalities are apparent across distinct levels in the social structures of the Indian higher education system and concerned psychological-sociological obstructions have been constantly manifested by several scholars. This study uses the theoretical paradigm of gender-blind sexism, which is an extension of Eduardo Bonilla Silva's (2003) color-blind racism that was used to analyze how the systemic racially based discrimination operates in US society but does not align with overt racism. The approach examines the contradiction between most whites' understanding of color-blindness and the maintenance of a color-coded system of inequality; most whites however believe that race is no longer relevant. It extensively uses the "concrete discursive" strategies that whites use to maintain white supremacy at the same time proclaiming their color-blindness.

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Bonilla Silva (2003) defines the four central categories in color-blind racism, which reflects and defines the dominant racialized social systems and reinforces the status quo. The four central categories of color-blind racism are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism is one of the primary components of color-blind racism. Abstract liberalism defines the principles of political and economic liberalism to deconstruct race. Behind the guise of abstract liberalism, Whites support “equal opportunity” and regard people as “individuals with choices”, thereby granting them agency but do not recognize the institutional discriminatory practices against people of color. Secondly, naturalization rationalizes racial issues as naturally occurring phenomena. In this category, Whites view school and neighborhood segregation as “normal” or “that’s the way it is,” assuming an almost essentialist or biological justification for segregation. Thirdly, cultural racism uses negative stereotypes and generalizations about different cultures and nationalities to justify racial inequities thereby “blaming the victim,” by reinforcing that racial inequalities are the outcome of the lack of spirit to work hard on the part of the minorities. Finally, the minimization of racism can be viewed as refuting the existence of discrimination in society and not acknowledging the impact of race on minority lives. Under this category, Whites believe that racism existed a long time ago and they currently live in a post-race society.

Gender-blind sexism, as we argue, quite similar to color-blind racism, demonstrates how gendered discrimination operates as institutional tools to discriminate between men and women. Gender-blindness, therefore, is the practice of discounting gender as a significant factor within the domain of human achievement and interaction. Practices of gender-blindness, therefore, reinforce gender hierarchy by privileging men over women without directly acknowledging the underlying discrimination embedded in sexism. Gender-blind sexism operates by imposing blame on lack of dexterity, inability to spend long hours in the workspace and lack of optimism. It fails to speculate about the systemic discrimination patterns that are deeply embedded in gender and not external factors.

Studies on the perpetuation of rape myths have often used the theoretical framework of gender-blind sexism to analyze how narratives around victim blaming and formulating policies to around sexual assaults (Stoll, Lilley and Block, 2018). These studies have predominantly used gender-blindness as an apparatus to demonstrate the sustenance and perpetuation of the rape culture. Participation of women in governance, policy-making and general administration of enterprises is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the education sector has been one of the early employers of women in the profession. However, on the social front, women in India have been held back by its patrilineal society. The patriarchal nature of the family structure oppresses women, resulting in selective neglect, while the patrilineal character deprives them of inheritance, resulting in a lack of resources. Moreover, the low literacy rate of the female population underscores the strong belief system in Indian society that the female child is always expected to live with their in-law’s family, implying rigid stereotyped roles of housewife and caregiver attributed to women.

This bias widens the gap among middle-income groups and people from the economically weaker section of society, because the cost of education for the girl child will outweigh the perceived more-important existential needs such as housing, sustenance and health resulting in selective neglect of the daughter. Consequently, women have been deprived of employment opportunities. Several scholars have highlighted the feminization of unpaid care work and domestic labor that contributes to the overall GDP of the nation but never gets accounted for (Robeyns 2003).

Gender in the Milieu of the Indian Education System

The enrolment of girls in higher education increased from 39% to 46% from 2007 to 2014, but female participation in India's labour force declined to a low of 27% in 2014 from 34% in 1999, according to a 2015 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Almost 12 million women are enrolled in undergraduate courses, but few continue to professional courses; 600,000 women were enrolled for diploma courses in 2013, the latest year for which data are available. Even fewer women sign on for PhDs; only 40% of PhD candidates are female. In 2016, as we said, girls were more successful than boys in clearing 10th-standard exams of a national education board, a trend that has been held over seven years. While 428,443 girls appeared for the 10th-standard exams of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), 379,523 were successful—a pass percentage of 88.5%, according to CBSE data. By comparison, 564,213 boys wrote the exams and 444,832 were successful—a pass percentage of 79%. The number of young men enrolled for higher education increased 13% to 17.9 million in 2014-15, from 15.8 million in 2012-13, and the number of young women enrolled increased 21% to 15.3 million from 12.6 million.”

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (2019) by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, a trend is apparent in which all the education sectors are male dominated. The data stated that “Women tend to focus on the humanities, with 38% of all women enrolled in Bachelor of Arts courses, followed by science and commerce; 28% of men enroll for BA courses. When it comes to a Bachelor of Education women (2.8%) once again outnumber men (1.8%). Up to 8% of all young men sign up for bachelor's courses in engineering, nearly double of women (4.1%). There is a similar skew for male (9%) and female (4.5%) in Bachelor of Technology courses.” The data represents the disparity in enrolment pattern between both the genders, the participation of women is less than that of men in science and technology.

The most recent National Education Policy (NEP 2020) is regarded as an inclusive framework where gender has been acknowledged as an important construct in the document.⁴ The Government of India recently announced the National Education Policy-2020 (NEP-2020) which considers gender as an important construct in the education framework.

The key questions that this study and its findings will aim to answer are: Firstly, what are the ways by which gender-blind sexism finds its similarities with color-blind racism in the context of the global south and Indian science academia? Secondly, how does gender-blind sexism privilege men over women in Indian Science academia? Lastly, what are the factors that replace overt sexism with gender-blindness, and why do they affect women academics disproportionately in Indian Science academia?

Contextualizing Gender-Blind Sexism

Gender-blind sexism, as we argue, quite similar to color-blind racism, demonstrates how gendered discrimination operates as institutional tools to discriminate between men and women in science fields. We argue that science fields profess gender-blindness but eventually disfavor women over men. Gender-blindness, therefore, is the practice of discounting gender as a significant factor within the domain of human achievement and interaction. Practices of gender-blindness, therefore, reinforce gender hierarchy by privileging men over women without directly

⁴ The main highlights of the new policy includes the goal to achieve 100% and 50% GER in school and higher education respectively, replacement of the 10+2 system with a 5+3+3+4 curricular structure aiming at foundation years, primary, elementary and secondary schooling, flexible and multiple entry and exit points in higher education, increasing GDP spend to 6% as compared to the current 4.6 %. Though the policy has listed gender inclusion as an important agenda, it does not however point out specific implementing roadmap.

acknowledging the underlying discrimination embedded in sexism. Gender-blind sexism operates by imposing blame on lack of dexterity, inability to spend long hours in the workspace and lack of optimism. It fails to speculate about the systemic discrimination patterns that are deeply embedded in gender and not external factors.

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In fact, latent forms of gender stereotyping operate as an important tool towards sustaining gender inequality behind the guise of gender neutrality. Acker (1990) argued that the very image of an “ideal worker” is shaped by the dominant masculine-ascribed traits of stoicism, rationality, ability to work long hours, and decision-making ability. Thus, even though organizations have a gender-neutral framework, the everyday practices within the organization applaud the male worker over the female. This paradigm is no different in fields of science where masculinity is appreciated over femininity and helps in the execution of gender-blind sexism.

India, Gender, and STEM

In India, marginalization is affecting the participation of women in crucial areas of Higher Education like Science, Math, Engineering, and Technology (STEM), which influences human resources and deprives women's participation in these areas. Accounts have been offered as to why perception typecasts reflect a distinct professional accomplishment. The most observable explanation is owed to the social and psychological constructs that have inadvertently defined the pattern of behavior resulting in the attitudinal difference in the workplace.

Throughout they lack expectant and considerate attitude from their parallels; they are prohibited in professional circles, which is the cause of professional alienation as a social exclusion. Though the portals of education have opened up for women, the extent of their integration and progress in science and technology (S&T) is still governed by patriarchal and old-fashioned mores in the Indian context (Kameshwara & Shukla 2017).

The contemporary scenario in Indian Higher Education demands a global perspective as the emergence of a global economy has influence everywhere. According to the global gender report, 2017, India is positioned 108 out of 144 countries on the economic participation and opportunities index. Academic reforms are required to meet changing contexts and bring research into the mainstream. This research aims to identify the attributions of discrimination in higher education, especially in sciences and challenges faced by female teachers which hamper their professional growth in higher education. The present study helps to identify the imperative determinants which are embedded in the higher education context.

Marginalization

The context of marginalization of women is considered to be those overt behaviors by men which reject, exclude, and ostracize women whom they perceive to be undesirable or without useful function. In the current study, gender becomes an operative variable that determines career growth, promotion, and appreciation by higher administration. In this context, the concept

proposed by Acker (1989) can be referred to as a “comparable worth”. The concept of comparable worth argues that both men and women should be paid equally for jobs demanding equal or comparable skill and responsibility. Huyer and Hafkin, 2013, stated that:

“The representation of Indian females in science & engineering (S&E) compared to female researchers in all disciplines has been just 12.5%, though this rate is considerably high compared to other countries like the US, European Union, South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia, and Brazil. India also has a low representation of women in decision-making, only 22% of legislators, senior officials & managers are females and only 26% of listed companies in India have a woman on their board of directors”.

Methodology

We employed informant interviews as a source of comprehensive information about practices, thoughts, and beliefs pertaining to women’s marginalization in the sciences in Indian academia. Due to the varied nature of the problem, applied snowball sampling, interviewing 18 men and 22 women faculty across science departments from a Central University in Uttar Pradesh. We also examined interaction patterns with men and women faculty at the levels of Assistant, Associate, and Professor through semi-structured interviews. Finding the indicators responsible for forming perception among faculty is of immense importance and therefore, after studying the existing literature and talking to various professors, questions were constructed for a semi-structured interview measure to understand the faculty perception. The questions covered for interviews aimed to understand factors such as social apprehension, the second shift, cultural capital, mobility constraints, and differential attitudes in higher education. We followed a grounded theory approach, to contextualize the emerging themes addressed during the interview process (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2016). The emerging themes from the interviews helped us analyze the theory of gender-blind sexism through an empirical lens.

Findings and Discussion

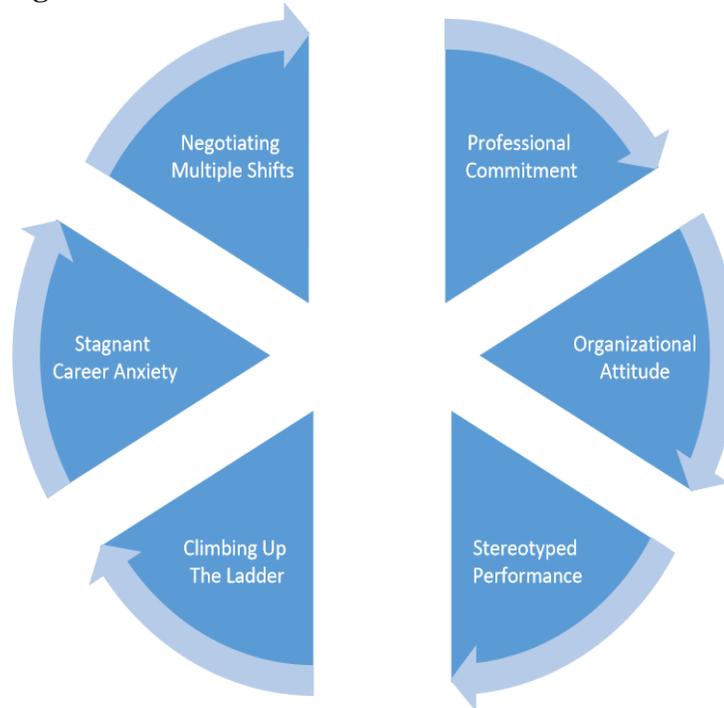
During the process of analytical coding, we realized that numerous categories were emerging from the narratives of the interview. So, for comprehensive analysis, we formulated various dimensions as determinants of their perception. These are classified as Stagnant Career Anxiety, Professional Commitment, Organizational Attitude, Stereotyping Performance, Climbing the Ladder, and Negotiating Multiple Shifts. These dimensions help in the operationalization of gender-blind sexism and draw parallel with Bonilla Silva’s four categories of color-blind racism. Unlike Bonilla Silva’s four categories, our study documents six dimensions that facilitate gender-blind sexism in Indian Science academia.

Dimension wise analysis

A thorough analysis of the explored dimensions is done in order to assess the trajectory of gender discrimination faced by females in academia. Each of the dimensions has been explained as mentioned below. The following section will deal with the various parameters that emerged during the extensive fieldwork and highlighted the various ways through which gender-based discrimination and inequality operate behind the apparent gender neutrality/blindness. The in-depth interviews revealed that women experienced discrimination in the guise of having to manage

work and childcare/family duties; not being able to network well in outstation academic conferences; or women simply could not remain in laboratories, because they had to travel home before nightfall. Thus, these so-called gender-neutral reasons became key factors to deter the growth of women in male-dominated fields of sciences. Discrimination against women was revolved around their inability to work late hours and travel for conferences, childcare commitments, and several other constraints. Thus, these “gender-neutral” parameters of performance eventually reinforced gender discrimination and prejudicial treatment toward women.

Figure 1. Extracted dimensions of Gender-blind Sexism



As represented in the Figure 1, in the context of this particular study, gender-blind sexism operates on six major dimensions as follows:

- i. *Stagnant career anxiety*: Here respondents projected their professional fear/apprehension of not being able to progress or achieve in their fields because of their gender. Although men believed that the organization in other words a heavily male-dominated space was gender-egalitarian and gender was never a factor hindering promotion or upward mobility within the organization. This dimension has close similarity with Bonilla-Silva’s minimization of racism category where Whites believe in the non-existence of racism and that the society and its institutions have moved beyond race.
- ii. *Professional commitment*: The study found out that female respondents were often demotivated by the lack of innovative academic tools, incentives, and appreciation from higher administration. On the contrary, men felt that there was no such dearth of appreciation from higher administration and they received ample opportunities to engage

in innovative research. This dimension has similarity with Bonilla-Silva's abstract liberalism where Whites proclaim individual agency and equal opportunity. They completely do not acknowledge historical institutional discriminatory policies that have systematically secluded people of colour from being represented politically and socially. Similarly, in this case, the organizational structure allows for individual freedom for progress and growth by virtue of their choices, however, disregards the historic structures of discrimination against women. Individual choices are not executed in isolation; on the contrary, these are contingent upon the elements of macro social structure that often bear the history of oppression and discrimination.

iii. *Organizational Attitudes*: The female respondents emphasized that organizations had a traditional perception of gender roles and that they reflected negative biases towards women. Men on the contrary believed that having the right attitude was the key to success in the organization, and that women often played the "victim card" and maintained a pessimistic attitude that diminished positive reinforcements from the organization. This dimension also bears strong similarity with Bonilla-Silva's minimization of racism.

iv. *Stereotyping performance*: The study found out that science fields harped on gender-based stereotypes such as women not being biologically inclined to the sciences but instead towards the humanities and arts. This negative gendered bias often resulted in blaming women as incompetent. Thus, incompetency became the operative variable and not gender. This dimension bears strong similarity with Bonilla-Silva's naturalization. Naturalization as theorized by Bonilla-Silva makes a similar claim by stating that differences between racial groups are biological and that differential treatment to minorities are justified and embedded in a biological essentialist rationale.

v. *Climbing up the ladder*: Here female respondents stated that they were often not allowed to get into administrative positions particularly those that required decision-making. This dimension echoed the traditional gender stereotype of women being incapable of making rational decisions and are therefore unfit for positions of authority, although opportunities were equally distributed for all. Naturalization as theorized by Bonilla-Silva makes a similar claim where Whites justify the racial differences based on biological predispositions. to discriminate against people of color.

vi. *Negotiating Multiple Shifts*: The female respondents in Science much like in any other field had the burden of dual shift/second shift where they were responsible for both work and family responsibilities. Managing the home front automatically became women's duty for whom negotiating work, family, and childcare responsibilities became arduous. This dimension is an extension of Bonilla-Silva's minimization of the racism category where Whites believe that race no longer exists and that the current society is post-racist. In the context of the above dimension identified in our research, we claim that women have to manage several roles disproportionately as an aftermath of believing that gender inequalities do not exist. This realization makes it easier for men to not share household labour and navigate multiple shifts. Hence, the latent agreement of living in a post-gender society like post-racist society reinforces traditional gender roles where the point of departure assumes that there is no further room for gender equality. Having this inherent

assumption therefore allows for gendered division of labour to overburden women with unpaid care work.

Stagnant Career Anxiety

Though women's presence in educational achievement and workforce participation has increased, inequities still persist. "My motivation is high, my destiny is not, and I have accepted it as a stagnant factor. It gives me displeasure to accept the unequal status in academics", a female Assistant Professor stated.

Male faculty, generally, do not prefer to work under women irrespective of their professional status as revealed in the interview. A senior faculty (male) stated that females have been found less efficient with respect to the decision-making process, the dependent nature has to be changed". Male faculty believed that expectations are very important in setting the culture of an organization. Male faculty seemed to be satisfied with the motivational and informative training programs whereas faculty differed about the support given to them when they entered college. Women perceived isolation and looked down in terms of capability, whereas men felt a sense of belonging and involvement right from the beginning.

Men just aren't used to seeing that many women in these settings.

"There is no problem with females' external environment to pursue the profession; work culture here is too good, everything is equally availed by both the genders. I do not suppose the aptitude is less in females, then why at all the system wants everyone to realize that there exists inequality by any means..." a male Assistant Professor stated.

Here, the male faculty member contradicts what a majority of his female counterparts claim when they say that there is very little scope for the latter to progress in the organization. Hence, organizations with systematic mechanisms of gendered discrimination appear to be gender neutral. Therefore, like Bonilla-Silva's minimization of racism category, men here believe that every organization has moved beyond gender discrimination and that the playing field has been levelled, if women are motivated, they will be able to reap benefits from an egalitarian system.

The decision-making process appeared as an important factor in the findings. Female faculty also claimed that they were overlooked in administrative and decision-making matters. As one of the female Professors pointed out,

"Even if women perform equally, they are not acceptable because it is the predetermined belief that they cannot be good administrators and excel in sciences, as a matter of belief, publication remains the only denominator for success and only teaching is preferred for females, not research. I consider it a stereotype".

The findings imply fear factor or apprehension to be associated with stereotyping and dual burden. Women fear being perceived as less committed towards the organization if they place boundaries on their availability (Atkinson & Hall, 2009). A male Professor stated that "there are no stereotypes attached with work today, it is more of the management than excuses given by the other gender..." His claim therefore once again echoes that men believe organizations have a central policy of gender neutrality and that there exist no gender biases. They tend to blame it mostly on gender-

neutral factors like lack of management skills that inhibit progress for one irrespective of their gender.

Professional Commitment

Teacher commitment indicates integrity and continuance for their profession. However, some women faculty members found it difficult to manage teaching, research, and family simultaneously and they also need to be at home on time. Female teachers opined that due to multiple social problems and responsibilities, their academic output in terms of publications is relatively less than males. Especially in the sciences, they have accepted, as above mentioned, that they are not able to devote much time to laboratories which are an essential part of the research.

One of the Associate Professors (female) pointed out,

“Sciences are difficult at higher education due to multifold challenges where time is the main problem as it gets distributed in shifting space and hampers the laboratory work affecting the professional growth”.

We found that female faculty reported less satisfaction with their professional lives than men; a greater sense of isolation and negative treatment by colleagues and the administration, which leads to their alienation and hence, affects their commitment. As noted by Handoko, Setiawan, Surachman & Djumahir (2013), “organizational commitment has a strong relationship with job satisfaction”. Senior female teachers revealed that despite being committed towards their job and organization, they are not content and feel the need to achieve more and want to grow professionally. A male Assistant Professor stated that “commitment is related to individuals, no gender-specific traits are present in achievement and success, females have reasons, but they should challenge, because it is equal for all.” This claim by the male faculty demonstrates that men are often blind to the idea of gender stereotypes playing a key role in success. This category, therefore, conceptualizes Silva’s abstract liberalism whereby men believe that there are equal opportunities for both men and women especially in a male dominated profession. They tend to ignore the systemic oppression that women have undergone.

Lack of understanding of the factors associated to the hard work for success represent the lack of identification with the issues that females face in the workplace. “Work commitment is one of the most important factors affecting working attitude” states Robbins, 2007. For instance, Tella, Ayeni, and Popoola (2007) claim that “if employees feel that they are working much harder than others in the department but are receiving fewer rewards they will probably have a negative attitude and less commitment towards the work”. This creates a negative attitude towards the organization in their minds and affects the growth, too. Probably, due to this attitude, fewer Indian girls take science and math courses in higher education and even fewer options for a career in math (Gunderson, Ramirez, Levine & Beilock, 2011).

As stereotyping increases, alienation from work increases, which decreases commitment and professional growth. However, according to Catalyst (2004) “women and men hardly differ in their ambitions”. Due to the commitment towards family responsibilities, Indian women’s commitment towards her work decreases, which hinders women’s professional advancement (Buddhapriya, 2009). Professors also feel that their job is tedious owing to teaching, research, and administrative burden. They need to keep themselves up to date with the advancements in their field, prepare for lectures, supervise scholars under them, and also fulfill administrative responsibilities.

Organizational Attitude

Societal culture limits the interest of women in science. According to Robbins (2007), it is an organizational culture that guides the attitudes as well as sets rules of behavior. Organizational culture must be maintained through a socialization process so as to unite faculty and organizational values, which will help in reducing symptoms of psychological distress, desire to leave the organization and hence, will lead to increase job satisfaction (Handoko, Setiawan, Surachman & Djumahir, 2013).

An Associate Professor (male) stated that:

“a promising attitude is needed for any profession, I do not agree that the less participation of women in sciences has to be seen as a discriminating factor, I suppose the majority of women can excel provided they keep optimism and ready for challenges to pursue after they are into jobs”.

This proclamation clearly states that the limited growth of women in science is merely perceived as their lack of optimism and inability to undertake challenges. In other words, the gender-blindness expressed here is embedded in certain key aspects such as pessimism and lack of aggression of women in the workplace. Much like minimization of racism, therefore, here men believe in gender disparity is an embodiment of the past and the current society is a post-gender one.

Though the portals of education have opened up for women, the extent of their integration and progress in science is still governed by patriarchal and old-fashioned mores. Faculty members cited the problem that institutes lack of faculty mentors and has overwhelming work requirements. Women faculty members also expressed concern about spousal employment and childcare. A female respondent stated, “Emotional sensitivity makes women weak, especially in professional metrics, my heart goes out when I remember my academic achievements of the past; I wish my society would have given me the status of men in the professional domain.”

Accordingly, such institutional policies around maternity leave and adequate childcare facilities resonate with a gender-blind form of sexism where institutions do not factor gender as a major component within the professional space. The image of the “ideal worker” (Acker, 1990) is that of a man or should have attributes of masculinity.

Stereotyping Performance based on gender

An Assistant Professor (female) pointed out,

“Gender-role typecasts penetrate into the career and are a result of a varied performance at the workplace. You know...women’s problems are complicated and acceptable as the mainstream worker is not acceptable as their publications are more due to the benefit males enjoy.”

Some respondents courteously expressed reluctance to involve in feminist debates. The majority of the women interviewed feel that they do not excel in their careers due to the stereotype that women are less ambitious and less committed.

An Associate Professor (male) stated that,

“If gender matters then why the females belonging to descent socioeconomic status are not able to make it after they join a job, there is no firm goal and domestic responsibility is on the shoulders of both, male and female. Objectivity and strategy are lacking in most of the females, I am not saying they cannot do, many women are successful in their profession because they could methodically pursue their career. So, mostly opt for arts, humanities rather than science and technology streams”.

Therefore, biological essentialism kicks in where men tend to believe that women are predisposed to arts and humanities and not the sciences. Much like Bonilla-Silva’s argument on naturalization, here the male faculty members highlight the difference between genders being embedded in biology and not social construction. The traditional model of academics where women are perceived to be better in Arts than Sciences. This perception translates to undermining women in Sciences by claiming that they lack rational thinking and scientific aptitude.

Climbing the Ladder

Results showed that female faculty are not much involved in the decision-making process. A newly appointed Assistant Professor (female) points out,

“Men easily socialize more than women and do networking in conferences and gatherings in academia, it’s not the same situation with women, and they are more reclusive hindering their social being which is detrimental in the long run and research collaborations. There are limitations involved in mobility which hinders the communication pattern, disruptions affect life in a personal and professional domain for women...”

Professional growth states the ailments rooted in the organizational array. “Women also experience a strong gender bias when being evaluated for promotions. Research within professional groups has shown that women have to significantly work harder to be perceived as equally competent as men”, according to Lyness & Heilman (2006). Almost all females responded the same that gender bias exists when the administration or selection committee compares the lab working hours of males and females. There is no consideration of other factors, which should be, ideally. A female respondent stated, “how can socio-cultural factors be ignored once we are dealing in academia, every research has social implications, so not considering the parameters which affect promotional growth, this is not fair”. An Assistant Professor (male) stated that “promotion depends on the hard work, publication, and overall productive outputs. It is the responsibility of a professional to do justice with the profession that confers the pledge.” Needless to mention much like his other male colleagues he reiterates that the path to success has nothing to do with gender, on the contrary, it is dependent upon “hard work” and “productive outputs”. Similar to cultural racism, men believe that women often do not work hard enough and therefore are unable to reap benefits from a fair and gender egalitarian system, thereby reinforcing gender-blindness.

A significant component of progress in academia is the ability to establish social networks and build social capital (Bourdieu, 1979) through extended hours of professional interaction. These subtle and undefined paths to progress by accruing social capital often does not happen easily for female faculty. In this study as well, faculty viewed that networking is a necessary tool to grow

professionally. We found that women faculty are often not eager for fieldwork due to household responsibilities; their mobility turns out to be an instrumental factor.

Negotiating Multiple Shifts

“It is my choice of not being ambitious as my family would suffer, which is not a marker of my quality as females. I bear more duties at home, but it is not right that I am nowhere less than male teachers as professionals”, says a middle-aged, yet Assistant Professor, who could not be promoted because of home-work conflict.

An Associate Professor (female) expressed,

“One may take an arts subject and appear from private mode or irregular mode, giving the opportunity to do justice but in sciences, one has to necessarily enroll in university as regular mode. So, it is more demanding and when it compares to males as counterparts, they are fortunate and relatively free.”

The conducive environment has always enriched growth in the profession. Sabil and Marican (2011) suggested that “practicing work-home segmentation and support from family members help women to manage work and family commitment effectively and efficiently”.

Women with children often bear the brunt of the Motherhood Penalty or the Mommy Tax (Crittendan, 2001) wherein their earnings and career take a hit since mothers disproportionately undertake childcare responsibilities. Hence, the price of child-rearing is also in the income of the parents (mostly mothers) who spend time raising children. However, this penalty is overlooked by organizations and made invisible. Much like the minimization of racism by Bonilla-Silva, this dimension is an extension of the same. An imaginary leveling of the playing field takes place where it is believed that gender inequalities do not exist because women have entered the dominated professions. On the contrary, as much as they have entered male dominated professions, women are mostly responsible for household chores.

The disparity has become an obvious phenomenon in professional growth. The findings suggest that professional achievements are directly proportional with discrimination, leading to a lucite ceiling effect. The lucite ceiling phenomenon is a more aggravated version of the “glass ceiling”, (Shukla, Chauhan & S., 2018). Dual roles make women highly unstable as they have to set priorities between their professional and personal lives, facing discrimination in both realms. While cases of women being fired because of being pregnant are less in number due to the threat of lawsuits, women often experience penalties for being mothers. Such practices highlight that sexism is practiced through latent forces and not direct methods like firing.

The differentiating factors between women who managed well at home and family life from those who poorly managed both are one could then be of significance since the two operate essentially in a homogeneous context. The foremost impulse is to look for the differences in women standing in work-home life. Some individuals, specifically women thrive on stress while others dislike it. Literature proves that stress can be both positive and negative; positive stress can lead to exhilaration. On the other hand, negative stress is induced by rampant neglect of potential in the workplace, therefore, women experience the brunt of negotiating the home-work front and are penalized for investing in the former. These forms of covert discrimination privilege men and

act as negative reinforcements toward women. Gender-blind sexism, therefore, does not directly penalize women because of their gender but discredit them based on the socially constructed attributes of femininity. The social construction and praxis of femininity is further manifested as an underprivileged attribute negating an idea of equality in the workplace.

Conclusion

The present research pursued to understand the reasons for inequality in higher education, especially in sciences by using the theoretical framework of gender-blind sexism and how this theory particularly draws parallel to Bonilla-Silva's color-blind racism. In order to get a comprehensive picture, the study has been discussed considering the different dimensions found from the narratives obtained during interviews, namely, fear/apprehension, commitment, attitude, stereotyping, professional growth, and dual burdens. The study was used as a tool to evaluate that gender-blindness operates in sciences along with other male-dominated fields that discriminate against women. The typical tropes through which gender-blindness or neutrality, much like Bonilla-Silva's color-blind racism, operates in forms of lack of aggressiveness, inability to spend long hours in the laboratory or travel for conferences and build networks. The analysis attempts to provide some critical insights into the aforementioned issues. The various threats to teacher commitment in education are lack of self-motivation; a monotonous way of teaching; lack of encouragement from higher officials and management; lack of increments and incentives; commercialization of education; hostile environment and lack of mentoring.

There were committed female teachers who were ignored in leadership responsibilities, mainly, they are perceived as 'soft', less ambitious, geographically immobile, and valuing family over work commitment. The organizational attitude dimension in the research proved to be prominent in forming perception. Organizations can develop a positive attitude in women by providing appropriate benefits. The availability of childcare facilities may start a positive practice in higher education, especially for female teachers. Also, it was observed that societal attitude is very important if the involvement of women in science has to be enhanced. Currently, cultural factors are said to limit the girls' decision of taking science for higher education.

One of the sub-provisions provided in NEP Gender Inclusion Fund is the promise of practicing gender equity in leadership roles so that women have role models to look up to for motivation. The policy advocates sensitizing the cohorts on gender issues such as gender role stereotyping, freedom of choice of profession, equal respect and pay, etc. Exposure of women to school education has shown affinity to improve their standard of living, increased chances of migration, have fewer children and are more likely to be employed (Duflo, 2001). NEP 2020 also recommends cutting down the number of degree awarding colleges through corporate mergers over 60 percent leading to increase in fee expenses for students which will have a direct impact on accessibility to afford quality education by women. On one hand, this would encourage more parents to pull women first from education while on the other hand, it would enable skill orientation among deprived ones for better prospects in future.

The core problem we found out in the research was the lack of acknowledgment of gender as a factor to deter the growth of women. Organizations proclaim that gender-based discrimination does not operate on the contrary policies and practices reinforce the gender divide. Policy documents have proposed various measures to promote faculty integration and gender equality in higher education, but distinct forms of inequalities are embedded in the academic milieu. Strong policies are required for neutralizing the discriminating effect of practices existing deeply in academia.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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