

CAN WE LOOK BEYOND GENDER SOCIAL ROLES IN INDIAN MANAGEMENT?

Abstract. *The article seeks to explore gender role, bias and social identities that define workplace structures and traditionally masculinised job positions in India. It deals with the problem of creating an unseen psychological bias in both male managers, leading to perceptual stereotypes, and among women themselves, creating an inability to see themselves as being capable of shouldering personal and professional domains with élan rather than guilt. Based on a literature review and analysis of gathered empirical data, we show how it is difficult to expect any rapid change in the perception of gender – from ‘a women-related issue’ to a multipronged perspective – to help penetrate the socially created and self-created glass barriers facing women executives in India.*

Keywords: *gender, women, India, management, glass barriers, stereotypes, second-generation gender bias*

Introduction

Much debate in western countries has concerned the “stalled gender revolution” that brought movement towards gender equality and helped reduce gender wage disparity, but suddenly started slowing down with more educated women opting out of the workforce and voluntarily taking a break from their careers. In their book “Second Shift”, Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung (1990) state that one of the primary reasons for the stalling of the gender revolution has been the lack of affordable childcare facilities as working women have found it increasingly difficult to balance their work and family/home responsibilities. Women’s lives involving working at the office (first shift) and working at home (second shift) leave them exhausted and irritable, unable to balance their mental and physical well-being. The situation has not improved substantially even in developed industrial economies like the USA, the UK or Canada where, today educated working women are deciding not to take on leading roles and responsibilities for precisely the same reason, namely, the inability to balance their family

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and work roles due to a lack of support. It is an irony that, despite rapid economic progress, increased business pressure and greater market competition make it harder for organisations to provide quality support services to their employees while the governments of developed nations have not introduced any major legislative improvements with the goal of allaying the woes of working mothers. In turn, the educated woman is becoming squeezed as she attempts to be an efficient and smart working woman at the professional level while also being a ‘super mum/super wife’; a fine balancing act that at best seems delusional and utopian in context. The responsibility for home care, childcare and elderly care still resides squarely on the shoulders of working mothers. Traditional gender-based roles seem to remain important for shaping social and personal choices and outcomes. In this article, we intend to analyse this universal problem in the specific cultural and economic setting of India.

Taking the above information and arguments into consideration, the paper seeks to look at gender role stereotypes and biases while outlining some thoughts that may be adopted to introduce a semblance of gender parity in the workplace for countries with a strong patriarchal culture like India. It seeks to advance the line of thought initiated by Robert P. Vecchio (2002) and furthered by Stephanie Coontz (2013), namely, that it is time to move beyond seeing ‘Gender’ as only a woman-oriented issue. This line of thought is propelled by the notion that gender equality is not an issue, but an opportunity to create gender-neutral workplaces that address employees beyond their gender roles and seeks to establish workplace flexibility and work-life balance policies that empower and motivate employees in the long run, irrespective of their gender roles, identities and socially-constructed biases.

Research Questions

The research work presented in this article seeks to answer the following questions regarding gender bias in the context of Indian workplaces:

1. How do universally existing gender stereotypes affect Indian workplaces?
2. Do socially constructed gender-role allocation and biases impact the selection and allocation of job roles (person-job fit) in Indian workplaces?
3. Are there any indications that the observed situation will change in the near future?

In order to provide answers to these questions, we used a combination of research methods:

- a review of relevant, recent literature;

- focus group discussions; and
- a survey.

The article has this structure: we present the theoretical and conceptual framework and social context of our research. A presentation of empirical data gathered in 2018 is then given, after which a discussion and the main conclusions based on the research are provided.

Gender stereotypes in workplaces and among management

UNESCO's (2003) definition of gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women as created by our families, culture and societies. They also include expectations that may be held concerning the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). The World Health Organization (Fact sheet 2015) defines gender as the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes a given society considers appropriate for men and women. The American Psychological Association (2012, 2015) states that gender refers to attitudes, feelings and behaviours a certain culture associates with a person's biological sex. Behaviour that is compatible with cultural expectations is termed gender-normative; behaviours which are incompatible with such cultural expectations constitute gender-non conformity. Thus, when such social constructed roles and identities tend to define the boundaries of a particular gender and anything and everything a member of a certain gender does is attributable to gender characteristics, this is defined as gender bias or a gender stereotype.

Research on gender stereotypes and biases in the context of managerial performance is based on an initial understanding among echelons of management that men are perceived as better leaders and managers than women. Managerial characteristics are regarded as being stereotypically male. This track of research builds on several theories like Lack of fit (Heilman, 2001), Role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and the Think manager-think male paradigm (Schein, 2007). Men holding higher and more powerful positions ensures that attributes not oriented to these gender characteristics are viewed as less favourable for effectiveness. Men are seen as more aggressive in pursuing results and more analytical, while being better able to handle pressure and work long hours. Men are risk-takers in decision-making and quite self-confident, while when dealing with subordinates they get to the point and can brutally reprimand them down without emotion (Ely, 1995).

This is in contrast to researchers who believe that modern organisations require a 'feminine' type of leadership. Women show concern for people,

are better at promoting cohesiveness and interpersonal relationships. They are more measured risk-takers and score high for conscientiousness (Ely, 1995). Women managers are more effective since they tend to form more collaborative teams through empowered leadership styles whereas men exhibit more command-and-control leadership styles that entail the assertion of power (Bilimoria, 2000; Budhwar et al., 2005; Williams, 2012; Srinivasan and Pallathitta, 2013).

Some stereotypical gender attributes or descriptive gender stereotypes (describing what men and women are like), as depicted by Madeline E. Heilman (2012), are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: GENDER STEREOTYPES (HEILMAN, 2012)

Communitary Attributes (Female stereotypes)			
Concern for others	Affiliative tendencies	Emotional Sensitivity	Deference
Kind, Caring, Considerate	Warm, Friendly, Collaborative	Perceptive, Intuitive, Understanding	Obedient, Respectful
Agency Attributes (Male Stereotypes)			
Achievement Orientation	Inclination to take charge	Autonomy	Rationality
Task focused, Ambitious	Dominant, Assertive	Independent, Self-reliant	Analytical, Objective

Source: Heilman, E. Madeline (2012): Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 32: 113-135.

This helps understand the perceptual performance expectations based on the gender roles allocated to men and women and how a poor fit with the allocated attributes promotes gender bias.

Organisations that address the issue of gender equality in the workplace through gender balancing or creating gender-balanced jobs primarily regard this an issue specifically pertaining to women. Most organisations grapple with how to deal with having a woman in a male-oriented role (Correll, 2011, 2014, 2016). Male managers across industries have difficulties dealing with either their female colleagues, subordinates or, in some cases, their superiors due to their inherent stereotypical social role identities and biases (Ely, 1994, 1995).

Work roles in masculinised areas such as management are typically male-oriented with competencies outlined based on expectations that a man would do the particular job (Fernandez, 2005). Performance expectations concerning defined job competencies are also created by virtue of male incumbents in certain work roles. Research and experience show that, in reality, not all men or women engage in the expected behaviours. Although men in totally male-dominated environments try to emulate more

male attributes, in gender-integrated firms both sexes tend to exhibit similar characteristics. That is, while men in an all-male firm may display more male attributes like power, aggressiveness and even the use of derogatory words, their behaviour changes in a firm where both genders are almost equally represented and show less aggressiveness and more controlled use of language and socially acceptable words in a mixed corporate environment. Similarly, women who tend to display more male attributes in a male-dominated firm so as to garner approval and respect willingly embrace their feminine attributes in a company with a more even gender ratio; not feeling embarrassed about being either less aggressive or more caring.

A psychological study by Jones Archer (2004) showed that aggressiveness across males and females was the same and there was hardly any difference, especially with an emotion like anger. The difference was not seen in how aggressive males or females were; instead, it was in how society viewed their aggressiveness. While for men, society viewed aggressiveness as a competency, for a woman the same aggression was regarded as repulsive. In an interesting study, Amy J. C. Cuddy, Susan T. Fiske and Peter Glick (2008) depicted the aspects of warm vs. competent by attributing 'warm' to female attributes and 'competent' to male ones. Respondents in the study related 'warm' with female attributes and 'competent' with male attributes, thus outlining social perspectives that see women as 'warm' and men as 'competent'. Accordingly, while managers can be female or male, they can either be 'warm' or 'competent', but not both. For example, competent women leaders like Carly Fiorina (Hewlett Packard) and Marissa Meyer (Yahoo Inc.) have faced continued criticism for being dominating and controlling.

This shows that employee behaviour is not necessarily attributable to their gender characteristics. This led to another line of thought beyond the gender-based views of competent leaders/managers (the raging debate on whether men or women are better) which finds that gender is not so relevant for leadership or managerial effectiveness and prefers to look at contextual factors and contingencies that may affect the outcome (Vecchio, 2002; Coontz, 2013).

Social identities and social-identity-created job roles are so deeply entrenched that women themselves encounter an unconscious bias when taking on demanding roles and responsibilities (Ely, 2013). The continuous pressure of the mantra 'You are a woman, you must manage the family' lowers their self-esteem, thereby forming a self-created glass ceiling called the Second-Generation gender bias - an unseen obstacle rooted in the societal stereotypes and role identities allocated to women (Ely, 2013). In their work on understanding social identity boundaries for women in the workplace and their own psychological barriers (second-generation gender bias) in avoiding positions that demand more responsibility, Robin J. Ely, Herminia

Ibarra and Deborah M. Kolb (2011, 2013) show how this bias overrides structural issues in workplaces and is becoming more of a personal issue for a woman wherein she herself is unable to recognise this subtle bias or effectively denies it, thereby compounding her lack of visibility and growth. Women on their part feel guilty about being unable to assume demanding positions due to their maternity break and upon returning to work gladly accept positions below their potential. However, second-generation gender bias may not be the most important factor of gender imbalance in decision-making positions in India since women there are still dealing with gender discrimination. Yet, it is important to be aware of it as women are not being encouraged to accept high-visibility assignments or to take up challenging job roles after coming back from maternity leave. This then leads to women's lower self-esteem and reluctance to assume higher leadership roles.

Women in India: history and facts

India has traditionally been a matrilineal society since ancient (Vedic) times. Hinduism defines women as the producers of life and caretakers for the family. There is a certain divergence between how women are viewed in Western and Indian society. While Western culture sees women as lacking power and the ability to assume leadership roles or to undertake strenuous work, the Indian philosophy based on Hinduism believes that women represent 'Shakti' or energy that needs to be tamed and routed for the creation of life (Srinivas et al., 1999). Through his work, Klaus Klostermaier (1994) upholds the revered status of Indian women since ancient times. He reiterates that ancient scriptures from the Vedic era always portrayed 'feminine power' as the ultimate source of life and the giver of energy to the masculine entity (a concept truly depicted as Ardhanarishvara, the representation of God as being half-man/ half-woman). Indian history speaks of many heroic women with strong willpower, viz. Sita from Ramayana, Draupadi and Kunti from Mahabharata. Rig Veda (an ancient Indian spiritual text; Vol. 28) also depicts women as having held high status as 'Brahmana' during those ages with equal command over scriptures and knowledge as their male counterparts. However, the country gradually transformed into a patriarchal society with the advent of the Aryans around 1500 B.C. and the diminishing of female power (Liddle and Joshi, 1986). By belittling its glorious ancient history, over the following centuries India essentially became a male-dominated patriarchal society with a semblance of matriarchy left in some tribes and certain regions of southern India. This gradual progression of patriarchal dominance is today visible in the country attributing women with little importance in terms of acquiring power, prestige, an enviable position or monetary growth (Rai, 2012).

According to the last Census Survey of India in 2011, women represent 48.5% of the country's total population with an average of 89 girls per 100 boys pointing to a major gender gap in the country. The figures vary among the states of India, with some states having a smaller proportion of women and some a bigger one; the population of Daman and Diu is 38.5% female while the population of the state of Kerela is 52% female.

Literacy rates also vary across the states of India. As per the 2011 census, overall 65% of women are literate in the country as against 82% men, with urban areas accounting for 80% female literacy (male – 90%) and rural areas 59% (male–79%). Female literacy rates are pathetically low for certain states like Bihar (51%), Rajasthan (52%) and Uttar Pradesh (57%), while others like Kerela (92%), Mizoram (89%) and Goa (82%) are considerably ahead.

The UNDP Human Development Report, Gender Inequality Index 2015 ranks India in 125th place out of 159 countries, describing its progression under medium human development. Along similar lines, the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks India in 87th place in the Global Gender Gap report for 2016.

The latest data from the Economic Survey 2016–2017 (Government of India) show a dismal labour force participation rate (LFPR) for women, just 23% compared to 75% for men. The workforce participation rate (WPR) is also low at 21% for females vs. 72% for males.

Women form an integral part of the workforce in both the formal and informal sectors of India. The McKinsey Global Institute report for 2018 estimates the GDP opportunity for India by advancing women's equality at USD 770 billion by the year 2025. Women in India perform ten times more unpaid care work than men where the inclusion of such work even at minimum wages would contribute USD 300 billion to India's economic output (McKinsey Global Institute report, 2015).

While the prevalent data suggest that women account for almost one-third of workforce participation, they are statistically less represented at the top of the corporate ladder, specifically in senior management positions. India ranks lowest in the Corporate Gender Gap report for 2010 with just 23% of female employees in the corporate sector, with the USA being the highest with 52% of female employees (Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010).

The report by Catalyst (2015) reveals that while at the entry level of the corporate sector the level of women's participation is 24% and men's is 72%, the numbers fall significantly to 19% for senior managers (with men at 81%) and 14% for executive officer positions (with men at 86%).

The Companies Act of 2013 introduced a regulatory push to have at least one woman on the board of listed companies, especially public companies with a turnover more than USD 3 billion or more. A further amendment in Revised Clause 49 required this to be done by April 2015. The Securities

Exchange Board of India (SEBI) exempted smaller companies whose net worth did not exceed USD 250 million.

The report by Deloitte, *Women in Boardroom: A Global Perspective* (2015) notes that in 2015 boardrooms in India had an overall representation of 7.7% women on company boards, and 8.3% for S&P CNX Nifty 50 companies. However, most appointments came from within promoter group families of organisations, with less visibility for professional women across corporate boards in India. The report also stated that women in the country are more represented in technology and media, consumer services and financial services companies with a quite a low level of representation in the manufacturing and healthcare sectors.

An earlier study by Banerji and Mahatani (2010) in the Standard Chartered-Women on the Corporate Board report (2010) cited that of the total 1,124 directorships in BSE-100 listed companies (comprising 26 industry classifications), only 59 directorships (about 5.3%) and 8 executive directorships (around 2.5%) out of the total of 323 executive directorship positions were held by women. In terms of companies, the survey shows 54 companies had no female directors on the board (54%), with 46 companies having at least one female director and a mere 12 companies with more than one female director.

Wage parity is a huge concern in India. In their report for Paycheck India on the gender pay gap in the formal sector of India, Biju Varkkey and Rupa Korde (2013) indicate that women earn 25% less than men and that this gap increases with age. Women above 30 years of age earned 23% less than men while those aged between 30–40 years earned 30% less than men.

The McKinsey Global Institute report for 2015 on gender parity in India reveals only 17% representation of women in GDP as against the global average of 37%.

Gender stereotypes/biases in India

We present the analysis of the literature and data which indicate that, like in other countries, women in India face a ‘double bind’, that is, a situation in which their choices are limited by the contradictory demands of private and professional roles in the context of existing gender roles. We point to some specifics of gender bias in the Indian context. Women in this country are expected to exhibit nurturing attributes. This stems from the cultural orientation wherein women have been revered as mother deities (Goddess Durga, Goddess Lakshmi etc.) and mythological stories that extol the virtues of nurturing and sacrificial attributes of women (Sita from the Ramayana epic, Yashoda from the Mahabharata epic and many more). They are expected to subscribe to the social identity created for their gender as

nurturing mothers/wives and to carry the same identity into the workplace through portrayal of female attributes when dealing with teams; that is being more considerate, caring and perceptive.

Kalpna Morparia, the CEO at JP Morgan India, notes that “Good leaders are expected to be strong, confident and assertive. Yet when women are strong, confident and assertive they are often perceived as uncaring, self-promoting and aggressive” (Business Today, 2016).

During the selection process, when their work is being assessed at the performance evaluation stage and also on a day-to-day basis be it with respect to their decision-making or team management efforts, they are expected to exhibit communality attributes (as shown in Table 1). Reflecting a culture that is patriarchal, the societal expectations spill over in the workplace where women who display agency attributes (being assertive or dominant) are frowned upon; for a very long time women being managers and superiors was unthinkable.

Neelam Dhawan, the Managing Director of Microsoft (India), recalled an incident regarding one of her roles as a superior when a general manager who was supposed to work under her quit on the following pretext: “*I can't tell my wife that I am reporting to a female manager*” (Business Today, 2016).

Deepali Bagati and Nancy M. Carter (2010) in a study for Catalyst on Leadership considered the gender gap in India and its myths. They highlight the following reasons for women's lack of career advancement up to senior positions.

1. The lack of key relationships in the form of sponsors, mentors or champions who are part of the decision-makers' network, that would enable women to take advantage of key inputs and impetus for career progression;
2. inability to understand company politics at senior echelons;
3. not availing themselves of tough and honest feedback; and
4. not exploiting access to special assignments for prestige job roles that represent the next step to senior-level positions.

In performance reviews, women are given generic feedback like “*You did great*” or “*Your communication style was commendable*” etc., whereas men receive specific reviews like “*You need to deepen your domain knowledge in a specific area*” or “*You should target this customer base for your growth strategy*” etc. As Shelly Correll (2015) states, men are sponsored while women are mentored.

In traditional sectors like manufacturing/construction, women opting for white-collar jobs are expected to take on office-oriented jobs like planning or co-ordination rather than on-site work roles that require interaction with a largely male workforce. However, the scenario has considerably

changed over the last decade with more women aspiring to be career-oriented and taking on challenging roles. No statistical data are available on the number of female civil engineers in the construction sector (white-collar workers), although a preliminary study by Sudha Goel (2007) indicates that about 3%–5% of the construction industry engineering workforce, i.e. about 31,500 to 52,500 female engineers, may be actively employed in the Indian construction industry.

India as a society with its patriarchal culture expects women to assume all parental obligations after the birth of a child. Childcare is a responsibility of women. The societal expectation placed on a married woman in this country is different and more demanding than for a married man. Even if family members are willing to share some aspects of home and childcare responsibilities, the primary responsibility lies with the woman, irrespective of her work role and responsibilities. This double burden further escalates when organisations do not provide any after-support services, like on-site childcare or emergency childcare facilities/breaks to assist in facing the challenges of a working woman (mother). Women face the ‘Motherhood Penalty’ for having started a family while men are rewarded with a ‘Fatherhood Bonus’. As mothers, women are pulled away from higher roles and demanding positions, citing ‘motherhood’ as the pretext for their inability to handle greater responsibilities. On the other hand, after becoming fathers men are considered to be more mature and stable, and thus offered higher roles and responsibilities as their likelihood of taking risky decisions drops (Correll, 2014). Aarti Shyamsunder, Alixandra Pollack and Dnika Travis (2015) portray the most established organisations in India that have introduced policies that offer flexi-work hours and paid maternity breaks (in some cases even extended breaks); however, they lack after-break support services like on-site/near-site childcare or referral services that can be a critical component of post-leave support services that would show Indian organisations’ commitment to the continued retention of female talent. In a country where the lack of stable childcare is an issue, where urban nuclear families hardly have any family support or external infrastructure like crèches and maids are expensive, the working woman is left without any option but to quit her job as the main caregiver and sacrifices her career on behalf of her family responsibilities.

Aruna Jayanthi, the CEO of Capgemini, India remarked:

“Most women quit their jobs primarily due to inability to balance their personal and professional life and choosing the former as their priority. It is when the question becomes of selecting one of these that we lose the plot” (Business Today, 2016).

Maitrye B. Das and Ieva Zumbyte (2017) outline the link between the 'Motherhood Penalty' and female employment in urban India. This study is interesting since it is one of the first empirical studies to attempt to understand the implications of being a working mother in India. The study shows a negative relationship between young children in a household and female employment trends, revealing that women find it ever more difficult to manage both work and household responsibilities when younger children are involved. However, there is an increase in female employment levels if a household member above the age of 50 years is available to share the responsibilities. The decision of an urban educated Indian woman to enter and stay in the employment market, especially if married and with young children, not only depends on the presence or absence of childcare; it is related to a host of other factors like type of work, wage rates, distance of commute, flexible work hours and other support services that can help balance work and family.

In his article on the issues faced by women upon returning to work in India, Aarefa Johari (2015) describes how even deciding to use maternity leave is a tough call for many, especially those working in smaller companies where the pretext of "under performance" or "integrity issues" is used to terminate the jobs of pregnant women. Unlike in other parts of the world, Indian companies think it is their right to question a woman about her marital status and willingness to continue work post marriage and pregnancy. Between 2008 to 2012 Indian labour courts registered over 900 cases involving the denial of maternity benefits by organisations. These figures are for the organised sector and only for those cases that were actually filed; most women do not file proceedings because of the dilapidated state of the judiciary and the long time needed to obtain justice (Arya, 2015). The McKinsey Global Institute report 2018, estimates that about 120 million female workers from the informal work sectors of India have no access to antidiscrimination and occupational health and safety laws, thereby impacting their participation in the workforce.

Neelam Dhawan, the Managing Director of Microsoft (India) and Vinita Bali, the Director and former Managing Director of Britannia Industries (India), noted: "Sales and marketing are considered as high pressure jobs and many women do not opt for it" (Business Today, 2016).

A 2017 survey on women working in 55 Indian information technology firms by the Open University of the UK and NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Service Companies) found that while most IT-sector organisations provided extended maternity breaks and to some extent a work-supported post maternity break; most HR managers (73%) were sceptical of the low rate of return by women after taking a break from work and also of changes in their work pattern due to childcare responsibilities which

may hamper productivity in the long run. Further, 80% of the HR managers believed that a woman returning to work after her maternity break may be either unable or unwilling to work long hours. Such a managerial perception held by those in decision-making positions is surely damaging to the second-career chances of women who take a maternity break or any other break due to additional care responsibilities. The data presented in this report also show that while 46% of women are enrolled at the tertiary level in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering and Management) and about 86% of women join the IT sector at the entry level, the numbers keep falling thereafter to about 20% women at senior levels with only some 4% making it to the C-suite or board level.

Results of the empirical work

Research design and methodology

We applied a combination of research methods in order to answer three research questions regarding gender stereotypes and bias in the Indian context:

1. How do the universally existing gender stereotypes affect Indian workplaces?
2. Do socially constructed gender role allocation and biases impact the selection and allocation for employee job roles (Person-Job fit) at Indian workplaces?
3. Are there any indicators that the observed situation will change in the near future?

We initially conducted a structured literature review. We decided to look at the existing literature in both the global and Indian contexts. This highlighted the differing aspects of gender stereotypes and gender role biases. A key word search was undertaken using the terms “Gender”, “Bias”, “India”, “Stereotypes” and “Women”. Research papers and business articles which included more than two search keywords were selected for the review process. Further refining of the papers and articles focused on those containing three search keywords; thus, the total reviewed qualitative data stood at 46 papers and articles. The sources used for the literature review were Google Scholar, Ebscohost, and Science Direct; the timeline was restricted to 2000 onwards since academic work on gender and gender equality in the workplace has had a limited focus in India. The results of the literature review were already presented above. Analysis of the existing data and literature reveals the current situation regarding gender bias in Indian workplaces.

However, much discussion has indicated that gender bias is dropping in

India among the younger generation of employees as they are more flexible and tolerant of the changing social dynamics whereby a higher share of women is entering the workforce and being included in workplaces. That is why, in the second phase of the research, we focus on opinions of the younger generation.

Accordingly, to further understand whether perceptual gender stereotypes (descriptive stereotypes) are present among future managers and decision-makers, we developed the following research instruments:

- a list of communality attributes and agency attributes, as highlighted by Heliman (2012), was created; and
- job descriptions for a Site Engineer and Project Planning Manager were outlined using the career section of a large multinational engineering and management conglomerate.

We used these instruments to test the 'Person-Job fit' that exists amongst the younger generation in India in focus groups containing 40 male students and in a survey of 84 female and male students.

In the initial stage, a roundtable discussion was undertaken on the existing gender stereotypes and biases existing in the context of India and occurrence of any changes in that regard. We organised the discussion in two focus groups consisting of 20 final-year male students each (a total of 40 students) from a reputed project management institute. This exercise was conducted in the conference room of that institute. One focus group consisted of those with no work experience, while the participants in the other had work experience ranging from 2–5 years and exposure to project management work. The participants were chosen at random where the only criteria were the age group of 20–24 years and male gender. Those who registered for participation were given priority to be part of the survey. The focus group size was limited to 20 students. Job descriptions related to project engineering and management were deemed suitable as such job positions/roles are gender-skewed, favouring male incumbents. The research aimed to see whether there is a less of this perceptual bias among the younger generation of male students/employees. The focus group discussion started by acquainting participants with the concepts of gender bias and gender-based role expectations in a general context. The moderator then initiated the discussion with the question: "*Does gender matter in the context of project site work?*", followed by a second question: "*Which job attributes are most important for a better job performance in site/project-oriented positions?*" The discussion was limited to 30 minutes with the group creating their own opinion leaders favouring a particular gender, outlining specific job attributes that justified why a certain gender was more suitable for site/project-oriented work roles.

In the next phase, we enlarged the sample with an additional 32 male students and 12 female students from the same institution and age group, thus the total number of respondents for the survey was 84. Participants were given the job descriptions of site engineer and project planning manager with a list of attributes based on Heilman (2012). They were asked to review and understand the job role for 10 minutes and rate the importance of each job attribute for the given job (site engineer/project planning manager) for performing the concerned role better, at an individual level on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 for 'of no importance' and 5 of 'highest importance'.

Research results and discussion

In our research, we wanted to test how realistic are the proposals to create job descriptions from a gender-neutral perspective by incorporating words that define the job responsibilities and allied competencies from a gender-neutral perspective (Correll, 2016) in an Indian context. This would be part of challenging the stereotypical gender bias and providing an equal platform for both genders. For example, most male-oriented jobs or jobs that have a majority of male workers typically outline job competencies with agency-oriented attributes like "achievement-oriented", "assertive", "task focused" etc. This makes it difficult for women to be considered for such positions as the stereotype related to women is they have communal attributes like "compassion", "consideration", "friendly" and "warm" that are not aligned with the expected work position.

Our literature and data review show this is still the case in India. That was also corroborated by the focus group discussions and survey involving young male management professionals. During the discussions and when outlining their preferences for specific job roles at site/project levels, young Indian males clearly stated that a woman is unsuitable for working on a project construction site as that would entail dealing with illiterate or semi-literate male labourers of various categories and at times the use of abusive language to get work done. In their opinion, by having a soft disposition and "warm" attributes (as outlined by Cuddy et al., 2008) women were not in a position to undertake such a role.

This opinion seemed to be uniform across the participants who had no work experience through to those who had worked in a site/project level position for 2-5 years.

Below are some quotes from the young male respondents:

If you are site engineer and you need the job to be done you cannot be warm and caring. It's a ruthless job as people every day come with some or other excuses. And the job has to be done on time.

A person shouldn't be too kind on site because it will lead to a decrease in order followed by workers on site which might result in the delay of work, he has to be dominant and assertive for some particular tasks when required to complete them on time.

The site engineer needs to be really task focused and ambitious towards his work because he has a tough job for almost a period of 8–12 hrs. Also he cannot be much friendly, warm and collaborative as the workers may take him for granted.

A project manager being the head of all the activities on site needs to be dominant and assertive, he should also be independent and self-reliant and have good understanding of the project also at the same time he should be kind and considerate to his subordinates.

Concerning the argument about why women can work as low-paid site laborers but not as white-collar site engineers, the group expressed the logic that for lower job categories, the issues of self-respect, dignity and safety are not a great concern. However, for white-collar jobs, where women come from good families (a subjective perception) these aspects do matter. This indicates that the gender role segregation of women working outside home is not only about gender, but also about which economic strata the employee belongs to. While for a woman from a lower economic stratum, workforce participation is about survival; for a woman with a better economic background in a white-collar job it is still about getting approval from the male figureheads of the family (father/brother or spouse), which is a strong reflection of the patriarchal culture. There are exceptions regarding this in the north eastern states of India like Sikkim, Tripura and Mizoram where a matriarchal culture is present. The McKinsey Female Empowerment Index 2015 notes that Mizoram, with a GPS (Gender Parity Score) of 0.70, scores high on equality parameters, comparable to Argentina, China and Indonesia.

In the survey, the majority of respondents irrespective of their gender or work experience levels chose to assign greater importance to agency attributes (see Table 1) for both jobs – site engineer and project planning manager.

A relative importance index (RII) was used to analyse the data (see Tables 2 and 3 below). The RII is calculated for each indicator and ranked accordingly, providing a summary of the importance of each indicator:

where

W = weighting as assigned via the Likert scale by each respondent in the range from 1 to 5, where 1 = no importance, 2 = negligible importance, 3 =

marginal importance, 4 = moderate importance and 5 = major importance/highest importance.

A = Highest weight (here it is 5)

N = total number in the sample.

$$RII = \frac{\sum W}{A * N}$$

Table 2: RELATIVE IMPORTANCE INDEX (RII) – PROJECT PLANNING MANAGER

	RII – Project Planning Manager	Rank
Task-Focused and Ambitious	0.90	1 st
Analytical and Objective	0.89	2 nd
Perceptive, Intuitive and Understanding	0.86	3 rd
Obedient and Respectful	0.83	4 th
Independent and Self-reliant	0.80	5 th
Warm, Friendly and Collaborative	0.77	6 th
Dominant and Assertive	0.72	7 th
Kind, Considerate and Caring	0.70	8 th

Source: Authors' own work.

Table 3: RELATIVE IMPORTANCE INDEX (RII) – SITE ENGINEER

	RII – Site Engineer	Rank
Task-Focused and Ambitious	0.87	1 st
Perceptive, Intuitive and Understanding	0.83	2 nd
Obedient and Respectful	0.82	3 rd
Analytical and Objective	0.81	4 th
Independent and Self-reliant	0.77	5 th
Warm, Friendly and Collaborative	0.76	6 th
Dominant and Assertive	0.76	7 th
Kind, Considerate and Caring	0.66	8 th

Source: Authors' own work.

This reveals that the respondents favoured attributes like “Task Focused”, “Ambitious”, “Analytical”, “Objective”, “Independent” and “Self-Reliant” for both positions. Communality attributes were less favoured by the respondents with even female respondents stating in their comments that site/project-oriented roles require one to be more task focused and assertive; although being dominant did not receive much support. The respondents felt being ‘kind’, ‘considerate’ or ‘warm’ and ‘friendly’ were not something that would fit with site/project roles as that required dealing with laborers and supervisors who were either illiterate or semi-literate (holders of

a trade diploma). The perceptual stereotype is so deeply embedded, even amongst female participants, that they believe their behaviour in male-oriented job roles needs to be like men's, pointing to agency attributes. These findings agree with previous research in other environments (Archer, 2004; Fernandez, 2005; Cuddy et al., 2008).

Below are some quotes from the female respondents:

Dominant and assertive is required to control the foreman and labour on site for assisting them in various activities.

Since your job is site work, you must have technical knowledge and understanding of site conditions. You must be assertive while giving directions for work.

I think the given job profile requires assertion, task focus, and analytical skills the most. But handling a site, the labourers and supporting staff requires a bit of dominance also. One can't always ask for suggestions and get optimum productivity, some strictness is necessary.

Being a project manager, he/she should have overall knowledge of all the tasks performed, the related risk, the schedule. The main thing needed accordingly is being assertive and having a good understanding of it.

To be a project manager, attributes such a task-oriented perceptive, being analytical and objective are very important.

It is ironic that while work/role segregation based on gender stereotypes exists in white-collar jobs in traditional sectors like manufacturing/construction, this seems to be non-existent at the tertiary level where the same gender (women) is understood to be unsuitable for site-level roles actually works as a manual contract labour side by side with her male counterparts. Construction sites, manufacturing sites and even agricultural fields across India have numerous women labourers where a woman working in such locations, undertaking tough physical labour despite her capabilities, does not seem to be an issue. Moreover, as outlined by Diptirekha Mohapatra (2015), an estimated 118 million women work in the informal sector in India. The non-agricultural informal sector itself employs about 27 million women; working as scavengers, cleaners, house maids etc., routinely undertaking tough physical labour in the most unsafe working environments. The Economic Survey report 2016–2017 by the Government of India states the Labour Force Participation rate (LPWR) for women in rural areas is 26.7% while in urban areas it is 16.2%. The report also shows there has been a rise

in casual and contract labour force participation, leading to the understanding that women are participating more in the Indian economy in the low-paid work category. Renana Jhabvala and Rave Kanbur (2002) showed that 51% of the labour force working on construction sites in India is unskilled casual women labourers involved in manual tasks like digging earth, mixing cement, breaking stones or carrying construction materials such as bricks, sand, cement and aggregate. They are rarely engaged in male-dominated skilled trades like carpentry, masonry, plumbing or electrical wiring. The details become more interesting in terms of the acquired educational literacy levels. Varkkey and Korde (2013: 8-9) in their report for Paycheck India showed the gender pay gap is lowest in the 'no formal education/below secondary education' levels (below Class 10 level), where men earned 12% and 9.37% less than women. However, by acquiring higher educational qualifications the gender pay gap increases gradually, reaching the level where women with master's level qualifications (any stream) and professional qualifications (like chartered accountants/cost accountants) earn 40%-44% less than men. This clearly indicates that in terms of economic participation and gender-based work segregation, women in India face gender discrimination for white-collar jobs, which shows the patriarchal hypocritical mindset of the country which has no objection to women working in demeaning job categories but will not accept their participation in the male fiefdoms since that challenges the patriarchal power.

Conclusion

This article aims to contextualise Coontz's (2013) work on gender equality as no longer a women's issue, but as an issue of looking beyond the gender lens and seeing employees' best qualities regardless of their gender in the Indian context. The issue does not seem limited to reinvigorating the gender revolution by bringing about structural changes but also exploring whether we can move beyond the gender perspective and pursue a paradigm shift in treating the 'employee' as a human being and according him/her with the respect and rights due to any human being irrespective of their gender. She suggests workplace flexibility policies and norms be adopted both through statutory legislation and organisational policies that ensure organisational support is regarded as a human rights issue, not just a gender-centric one. She proposes looking at the idea of adjusting workplace flexibility policies for working couples rather than just for working women. New-age young men are quite supportive of their spouses in terms of child caring responsibilities and are willing to share such responsibilities. However, most countries do not have any specific policies that seek to put the onus of childcare responsibilities on both parents, instead most existing

policies place the bulk of responsibility for childcare and support on the woman (mother) through limited-duration leave (paid maternity breaks), effectively hampering her career growth and progression while making this a woman-centric issue.

The results of our empirical work allow us to answer the questions posed at the start of the article. The results show that Indian workplaces have not yet changed according to the proposal of Coontz (2013). Based on a review of the literature and data, we found that the universally existing gender stereotypes strongly affect Indian workplaces as they are embedded in the very rigid patriarchal and hierarchical cultural context.

The statements of the focus group participants as well as the survey show the existence of a high level of gender bias and the prevalence of traditional gender roles among young Indians. This shows that socially constructed gender role allocation and biases impact the selection and allocation for employee work roles in Indian workplaces and that there are no indicators showing the observed situation will change in the near future.

Based on the results of our analysis, we think it is sensible to introduce some organisational and other policies and actions in Indian workplaces:

Organisations should consider introducing gradual-return-to-work models and part-time work for both parents, as used extensively in some Western countries.

Managers who deal with female colleagues, subordinates or superiors need to take sensitivity training programmes intended to reduce or eliminate the stereotypical unconscious gender bias that exists in their thought process, eventually affecting the way they deal and behave towards women. As superiors, male managers need to see women from a gender-neutral perspective more than seeking to judge or evaluate her based on her social role and identity.

Reducing negative language during performance evaluations and giving greater visibility to female managers similar to the sponsorship accorded to male managers can support their growth leading towards higher roles and positions. Quotas for board composition are not filled due to the lack of professional women managers at medium levels. Accordingly, greater visibility to competent women managers will help them penetrate the invisible glass ceiling. For example, rather than judging a woman for not staying back after regular office hours to work, it would be prudent to see whether she is doing a better job within the usual office hours by multitasking and efficiently completing her work. One should not judge a woman on what has been traditionally accepted in a certain role as managerial effectiveness, instead one should see if she has been able to bring a fresh perspective to the work position through her own unique qualities and attributes.

Making the teaching and learning of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects more gender-neutral and engaging would work towards the greater participation of women. Research has shown that most STEM subjects are taught by male professors who have a strong bias for female students in terms of their abilities and competence to successfully complete such courses. In addition, stereotypical comments that women are unable to handle work in such male-dominated sectors further seek to dissuade female participants from taking such courses, leading to the dearth of talented women across roles and jobs.

To conclude, we think that given the country's disposition to lack workplace flexibility norms, structural changes alone seem insufficient for overcoming the hurdles in the way of a woman being accorded her justified position and dignity in the Indian workplace. In a society that remains patriarchal, gender bias is deeply entrenched and gender balancing is primarily regarded as a women-related issue.

This work advocates taking a multipronged perspective to reducing gender biases and stereotypes. Promoting and promulgating statutory policies that encourage workplace flexibility irrespective of gender, sensitising society, policymakers, statutory bodies, and organisations about the need for gender-inclusive workplaces not in the sense of egalitarianism but of the practical benefits that can accrue from shedding stereotypical social and organisational identities and roles, sensitising women and counselling them to help bring about a sea change in how they view their social roles and identities (thereby reducing their second-generation gender bias) would all be effective measures for making Indian women capable of accepting their own unique attributes for professional and business success.

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