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Gender Discrimination against Women: A Brief Review of Key Causes and Effects and Islamic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Gender discrimination is an intricate phenomenon that can be seen not only in organizations but also in the society as well. Especially, gender discrimination against women is enacted in the policies, practices, processes, and culture. In the light of brief literature review, the paper encapsulates that cultural element and natural and distinctive characteristics of males and females are the key reasons, whereas poor mental health continuum (i.e., poor emotional, psychological, and social well-being) is the leading adverse effect of gender discrimination against women in the society all over the world. Accordingly, the paper presents a guideline to consider these factors along with Islamic perspective and work in the right direction concerning policy and decision making to promote fairness. Lastly, taking into consideration the causes of gender discrimination, Quranic verses and seerat-e-tayyaba on it, the paper suggests that males and females should not be compared in any manner and should be distinguished, treated, and respected individually for their specific and unique traits.

Keywords: *Gender Discrimination; Stress, Emotional Well-Being; Psychological Well-Being; Social Well-Being.*



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1. Introduction

The phrase gender discrimination refers to the repudiation of rights, benefits, or opportunities to an individual because of his gender. The practice of giving special consideration to a particular gender, when making a decision that who gets a job, promotion, or some advantage is also known as gender discrimination. In organizations, females mostly face discrimination as compared to men. Men who are even less qualified may be promoted just because they are male and women may miss such opportunities just because they are female. Women may be discriminated for reasons such as: being older, not pretty, and in positions like public relations and sales ¹. Even after years of such policies, rules, and laws that promote the equality of gender, we still see work-related segregation and gender discrimination against women in societies all over the world ².

Gender discrimination against women is a censorious matter. It starts at birth, as a relevant example in this regard is the sex-selective abortion for want of sons. There are numerous instances of such cases all over the world but the issue has been critical particularly in China due to its one-child policy in the past ³. In developing countries and even in some parts of developed countries, boys are usually given more time and attention in math and science, whereas girls are motivated to study arts. Boys are comparatively encouraged a lot to participate in sports than girls. Importantly, girls are even forced to pursue professions only like nursing, teaching, and caregiving ⁴. Further, women face discrimination at the workplace like lack of opportunities for women to be leaders ⁵ and low career progression as compared to men ⁶. Therefore, gender discrimination increases the trauma symptoms in women ⁷. Specifically, gender discrimination is one of the main contributors for mood disorders, depression, and anxiety among women ^{8,9}.

Taking all the critical aspects of gender discrimination against women into consideration, this paper briefly explores this phenomenon. The abundance of literature is available on gender discrimination against women; however, the present paper is an important step towards highlighting its most significant elements (i.e., causes and effects) along with its examination in the light of Quranic verses and seerat-e-tayyaba. The key objectives of the paper are to summarize the factors that are crucial to stimulate gender discrimination against women, further review its leading side effects and analyze this phenomenon in the light of Islamic perspective. The paper highlights the issue that such discrimination leads to under-employment and under-utilization of women. It reveals that such discrimination puts a negative effect on the mental health of women, makes the working environment antagonistic and discouraging for them, and also hampers their growth in the society.

2. Brief Review of Relevant Literature

The lack of representation of women is persistent across the globe. As of 2014, the representation of women in leadership roles was less than 20% across the G20

countries. Canada was at the first place representing 45.9% of women as leaders, followed by Australia (39.2%), South Africa (38.1%), UK (36.2%), Brazil (33.8%), US (33.5%), Italy (28%), European Commission (27.5%), Argentina (27%), France (25%), Russia (23.4%), Mexico (20.6%), Germany (17%), Indonesia (16.4%), India (14.8%), Turkey (9.4%), China (9.1%), South Korea (4.8%), Japan (1.8%), and Saudi Arabia (0%)¹⁰. In spite of the increased efforts to promote equality, this trend (i.e., women's representation as leaders) seems to progress very slow or even stalled¹¹. As of 2023, the representation of women in leadership roles in administrative and support services even in the highly developed countries like USA and Canada is around 40%. Surprisingly, women in health care and education sectors in USA and Canada still struggle to secure 50% of leadership positions, whereas these sectors should have a majority of female leaders¹². The under-representation of women is based on vertical and horizontal work-related segregations. The vertical and horizontal segregations are known as “glass ceilings” and “glass walls” respectively in the literature. Vertical segregation is related to where women strive to achieve a position in top management, whereas horizontal segregation is linked with the concentration of women in lower positions due to scarcity of opportunities to get leadership positions¹³. The work-related segregation in regards to women is clearly noticeable in organizations. Women mostly face difficulties in their career progression because of the role conflict between their personal and work lives. This conflict occurs due to the unavailability of flexible work schedules, part-time work, and childcare facilities¹⁴. Working women have to struggle a lot to create the work-family balance because they are overloaded by family and childrearing duties due to the prevalent traditional categorization of gender roles. Many women even in developed countries like Korea pass through such critical problems particularly due to a trend of working long hours and even on weekends¹⁵.

2.1 Key Factors behind Gender Discrimination

It is a fact that perceived sex discrimination is more prevalent among females than males^{16,17}. A study highlights that gender stereotyping amalgamates with institutional policies over workplace settings to contribute to gender discrimination. A widely held thought considering women as less invested workers and sexual objects, and further notions of women's characteristics as mismatched with particular jobs are also important factors leading towards gender discrimination¹. Organizations consider behaviors like supremacy, command and control, aggressiveness, confidence, independence, influence, and drive that are mostly related to men as more valuable. Behaviors like being caring, gentle, polite, compassionate, concerned, and accommodating that are related to women are not seen as highly valuable by the organizations. These particular characteristics of men and women lead them to associate with specific roles in organizations¹⁸. Inefficient

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implementation of policies regarding equality, high costs of childcare, and less earning rate in organizations for women staff than male employees are important elements that increase gender discrimination against women ². The organizational tendency for masculinity is actually strengthened due to different rewards and work practices that privilege men's characteristics and working patterns ¹⁸.

It is important to note that male dominance also depends on factors like: men are dominant in the organizations because it is believed that they are more capable to be administrators or leaders; it is rooted in the culture that men should be given preference over women; states are mostly governed by men and hence supremacy and government exhibit a cultural tendency of preferring men over women; and the administration and leadership is considered as the domain of men because of the cultural preference of perceiving men as forceful and aggressive. Aggression and forcefulness being masculine qualities are valued by societies above feminine qualities like obedience, dependence, and nurturance ². Concluding all these arguments, it can be proposed that male and female characteristics along with cultural predisposition of considering men as more capable for most of the jobs and being administrators or leaders lead to gender discrimination against women not only in organizations but also in the society all over the world.

2.2 Perilous Consequences of Gender Discrimination

Work-related gender discrimination against women represents serious consequences. Studies demonstrate several negative effects of gender discrimination against women like job dissatisfaction; reduced organizational and affective commitment; increased life stress and turnover intentions; weak performance; and less trust in the organizations ^{2,19,20}. In fact, gender and race-related discrimination against women is the main source of increasing depressive symptoms and miserable psychological and social well-being ²¹. In addition, studies report that trauma-related symptoms also become severe in women due to gender discrimination ⁷. Researchers argue that "discrimination experiences may affect health by decreasing an individual's self-control resources, potentially increasing participation in unhealthy behaviors or decreasing participation in healthy behaviors" ²².

Essentially, the main consequence of gender discrimination is the stress factor ²³ which is further expected to have a negative effect on the mental health continuum that is a combination of three core components namely emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Emotional well-being represents the "presence of positive affect" in individuals. Psychological well-being refers to the efficient functioning of individuals with positive and good feelings. Individuals are considered socially healthy "when they see society as meaningful and understandable", and feel that they are completely accepted by the society ²⁴. Due to the stress generated by gender discrimination, women may not be able to feel positive affect while having negative and wicked feelings and they may see society as incomprehensible and

inconsequential²⁵. Therefore, they become emotionally distressed, psychologically disturbed, and may not be socially effective or in other words have poor mental health continuum (i.e., poor emotional, psychological, and social well-being). The literature also provides support for the argument by illuminating that stress factors are uncontrollable and unpredictable and may have negative effect on the mental health of individuals^{22,26,27}. An individual who is completely fine in terms of his psychological, emotional, and social well-being is considered as completely mentally healthy and is regarded as flourishing, whereas an individual who has missing any one of these three components is referred to as languishing. Individuals with complete mental health have high emotional strength, a positive state of mind, and optimistic psychosomatic and social functioning. On the other hand, individuals with a low mental health continuum will be inactive with feelings of emptiness and unfilled²⁸. Therefore, women suffer a lot concerning their mental health continuum because of gender discrimination at the workplace as well as in the society. So, it can be concluded that gender discrimination against women negatively affects their mental health continuum (i.e., psychological, emotional and social well-being) through stress.

3. The Islamic Perspective

3.1 The Holy Quran and Gender Discrimination

In the Quran, there are numerous verses that emphasize the equality and dignity of all individuals regardless of gender. However, interpretations of these verses can vary widely among scholars and within different cultural contexts. Some verses often cited in discussions about gender discrimination against women includes the following:

"O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer"²⁹. This verse is often interpreted as highlighting the equality of men and women in their creation from a single soul.

"For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned"³⁰. This verse is sometimes used to argue for gender equality in matters of inheritance, though interpretations may vary.

"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their private parts and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward"³¹. This verse is often cited to emphasize the spiritual equality of men and women.

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"And due to the wives is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them [in responsibility and authority]"³². This verse is often interpreted in different ways, with some scholars emphasizing the notion of men's responsibility and guardianship over women, while others emphasize mutual rights and responsibilities in marriage.

It's essential to note that interpretations of Quranic verses regarding gender roles and equality can vary significantly depending on cultural, social, and religious contexts. Many Muslims and Islamic scholars advocate for interpretations that emphasize and reject discrimination against women, while others may hold more traditional or conservative views on gender roles.

3.2 Seerat-e-Tayyaba and Gender Discrimination

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was most insistent in instructing men to be generous to their women. During the famous khutba Hajj al-Wada (farewell pilgrimage), thousands of companions of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ were present. He ﷺ addressed all the Muslims about the rights of women in this khutba as under:

"Fear Allah regarding women. Verily you have married them with the trust of Allah, and made their bodies lawful with the word of Allah. You have got (rights) over them, and they have got (rights) over you in respect of their food and clothing according to your means"³³.

He ﷺ advised all Muslims to be respectful towards their women while fulfilling their rights. The above hadith highlights men rights over women and women rights over men and disapproves the gender discrimination. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ also said:

"Whoever has two or three daughters or sisters and treats them well will go to Paradise"³⁴.

This hadith highlights the importance of women in Islam. These narrations are insightful regarding Prophet Muhammad ﷺ gentleness and compassion towards women. He ﷺ tried to unshackle women from all types of cruelty, mistreatment and unfairness.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

It is important to note that any job or role is not related to any particular gender; all it depends on the style required for the job. For example, leadership in the military context requires masculine qualities, whereas leadership in the educational and health care sectors mostly requires feminine qualities. However, it is seen that education and health care organizations are also dominated by men instead of women which is a crucial aspect concerning gender inequality^{12,35}. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the existing knowledge on gender discrimination. By highlighting the causes and harmful effects of gender discrimination along with Islamic perspective on it, the paper invites the attention of all the organizations and governments across the globe to take corrective and preventive measures to make the environment free of discrimination. The paper can be beneficial for the policy

and decision-makers to improve and strengthen the policies and make their implementation stronger concerning parity at the workplace. It is also important for governments to take concrete steps to change the thought process and cultural elements that cause considering women as weaker, sexual objects, and degraded in the society.

Emotional intelligence is expected to play a significant role in mitigating negative effects of gender discrimination. It is due to the fact that individuals with a high level of emotional intelligence have more control over their emotions and therefore it is easy for them to understand and manage their emotions effectively. An emotionally intelligent person is wise enough to decide about his suitable reaction according to the situation and act in a precise and accurate way ³⁶. As a matter of fact, individuals' life experience is significantly affected by how they feel and perceive which in turn can play a key role in determining their level of satisfaction ³⁷. An individual with a high level of emotional intelligence is also more competent in managing stressful frame of mind ³⁸. Goleman ³⁹ affirms that we cannot get rid of stress, but we can reduce the stress level by improving emotional intelligence skills. Individuals who have the benefit of a high level of emotional intelligence ultimately may have higher satisfaction level and may feel positive behavior because of the high level of self-awareness, self-management, and self-motivation. Individuals with a high level of emotional intelligence have more skills for monitoring their own emotions and they also experience and feel much better moods as compared with those individuals who have a low level of emotional intelligence ⁴⁰. It seems that emotional intelligence may moderate the relationship between gender discrimination and mental health continuum in a way that the relationship will be weaker in the presence of high emotional intelligence level. In addition, studies report that perceived discrimination is negatively related to health, job satisfaction, and happiness but "higher education dramatically lowers estimated health tolls of gender discrimination and also predicts higher exposure but lower vulnerability to gender discrimination" ²⁵. Therefore, it is expected that improvement in the education level of individuals may also help them to diminish the adverse effects of gender discrimination.

Lastly, taking this long-standing phenomenon into consideration, it is suggested that males and females own identification and characteristics should be considered and given importance instead of comparing them in any respect. In simple words, the mystical differences and similarities between males and females are obvious psychosocially and in terms of their physicality and the same is also noticeable and evident in the nature to whom we belong. These dissimilarities and common features of both males and females should be accepted, acknowledged, and endorsed regardless of their characteristics.

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