

# Gender Equality and Human Resource Development

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**Abstract.** As an increasing number of females enter the labor market, the problem of gender inequality has raised strong interest in the management field. Although the proportion of women at managerial positions has grown in recent days, the representation of females at top management positions is still very low. In this study, constraints on females' accessing equal development opportunities in organizations are illustrated and some suggestions for eliminating these barriers are offered from the view of human resource development.

**Keywords:** gender equality; career development; stereotypes; mentorship; family responsibilities.

## 1. Introduction

Gender equality has long been considered as a hot topic in both practitioner and academic field. Although females only constitute 6.4 percent of CEOs in Fortune 500[1], this does not mean that females are less capable than males. A study shows that enterprises led by women tend to operate better than that led by men [2]. Therefore, it is of importance to increase female representation in leadership roles and achieve gender equality in career development. This study aims at identifying the obstacles to women's career advancement, which includes gender role stereotypes from traditional beliefs, family responsibilities and lack of support from companies. Then, some measures to remove these obstacles including providing awareness scheme and developing female development program are provided from the human resource development perspective.

## 2. Barriers to Female Career Development

### 2.1 Gender Role Stereotypes

Gender role stereotypes are the main barrier to women's career success and this can be understood by social role theory and role congruity theory [3]. Social role theory argues that males' qualities are societally associated with some leaders' traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness, and these masculine characteristics do not belong to females. This belief makes women the second consideration following men in the face of promotion opportunities. Role congruity theory argues that people get punished when they fail to meet social expectation. Males are commonly regarded as decisive, independent, assertive and rational persons, whereas females are usually viewed as kind, helpful, warm, communal and considerate individuals. In this case, when women aim at pursuing higher positions and behave assertively and decisively, they may be rejected because they are not communal enough [3]. Thus, owing to the adverse impact of gender role stereotypes on women, it is hard for them to access equal development opportunities, no matter what type of characteristics they display.

Males indeed display greater dominance, assertiveness and aggression than females do [4]. Nevertheless, whether these traits play an important role in increasing leadership effectiveness remain unclear, and greater physical and verbal aggression and dominance are found to have limited advantages to leadership [4]. On the contrary, the abilities to maintaining good relationships with colleagues and motivating others to contribute positively to companies play a vital role in leading an organization [4]. Given the negative influence of the unreasonable gender role stereotypes on women's career advancement, it is necessary to eliminate them.

## 2.2 Family Responsibilities

A survey shows that one third of females believe that heavy family duties result in their failure in achieving promotion [2]. This is because men's shouldering fewer family responsibilities makes women bear more. Women are traditionally considered as caregivers and homemakers, so it is not surprise that a survey reveals that females account for almost 66 percent of caregivers, and most of them are employed women [9]. Even though men offer some help, women still spend up to 50 percent of their time more than men in doing housework and providing care [9]. Caregiving and housework occupy a large amount of women's lifetime, so it is difficult for them to devote to their career. Some women even give up their jobs and stay at home to take family responsibilities. Then, when they return to work and face promotion opportunities, they may find it hard to compete with men who keep working for a long time. Consequently, family responsibilities are considered as a barrier to women's promotion.

## 2.3 Lack of Support from Companies

The lack of leadership engagement opportunities in enterprises exerts a negative impact on women's ambitions to pursue leadership. McKinsey & Company reports that women are commonly offered fewer challenging tasks, fewer opportunities to engage in important organizational events and to make important decisions, as well as women get less acknowledgment even though they make a huge contribution to their companies [5]. Such exclusions may thwart their self-confidence because they have fewer opportunities to exercise and show themselves, which inhibits their desire for promotion [6]. Thus, the lack of leadership engagement is one of the obstacles to women's career advancement.

The lack of mentorship in companies is another constraint on females' development. Female mentors are commonly seen as role models for women with respect to their boardroom etiquette, leadership styles and effective behaviors, all of which is beneficial to developing women's career. However, a small proportion of females at top positions in organizations make it difficult for female employees to access female mentors in companies. Moreover, a study reveals that male managers do not have a high willingness to participate in mentoring activities with females [7]. However, mentors are important because they act as advisers giving career advice and assisting new staffs to adapt to organizations [6]. Given the difficulty of accessing both male and female mentors, it is hard for women to gain the same advancement opportunities as men do.

In addition, the lack of organizational support in networking is also a barrier to females' career success. McKinsey & Company reports that female employees have fewer chances of informal interaction with their managers such as lunch meetings and casual conversations [5]. Similarly, A research finds out that 48 percent of male managers, compared with 33 percent of female managers have lunch with their leaders once a month [8], which indicates that male managers have more opportunities of accessing executives than female managers. Employees who regularly connect with leaders are more likely to get promoted and inspired to be a leader [5]. Therefore, fewer networking opportunities negatively influence women's advancement.

It is worthwhile to note that these constraints are interrelated with each other instead of existing independently. For instance, gender role stereotypes in the traditional culture may lead to organizations' unwillingness to offer female employees support [9]. The family responsibilities could result in the difficulty of engaging in organizational events where there are networking opportunities [6].

## 3. Measures to Addressing Problems

### 3.1 Providing Awareness Scheme

Due to the fact that gender role stereotypes are a major barrier to women's gaining promotion opportunities, it is necessary to eliminate this bias towards women that they are born to be a caregiver and they cannot perform as well as men at work. In order to show that they are as capable as men, women must display a better work performance than men to get same rewards [7]. This is extremely

unfair to them. Allen and his colleagues suggest that gender role stereotypes will decrease women's self-confidence and subsequently impact their career choice [9]. Moreover, from the perspective of male employees, a report shows that 67.4 percent of men often feel embarrassed if their managers are women [10]. Thus, it is necessary for organizations to introduce awareness scheme for both men and women to eliminate gender bias and make women believe that they can perform as well as men, and encourage men to take more family responsibilities. In addition, there is a belief that if top managers change their values, the equal working atmosphere is more likely to be created [11], which is consistent with the idea proposed by Liu that raising awareness from high-level management exerts a positive impact on promoting females to management positions [12]. In other words, enterprises should set up awareness scheme which engages every individual from female employees to male employees and from high-level management to common staffs. Then, the problems caused by gender role stereotypes can be mitigated.

### **3.2 Developing Female Development Program**

The female development program should provide career planning, mentoring and networking for women. If organizations encourage female employees to set higher career goals and support them in career planning, their self-confidence and visibility to further advancement are more likely to be increased. Owing to the gender bias and lack of opportunities to engage in leadership development, females may have less positive self-awareness and desire of pursuing promotion. In terms of applying for career advancement, females are inclined to worry about their qualifications, skills or experience, so they tend to wait to be asked [11]. Therefore, it is necessary to give female employees challenging tasks to help them believe in their potentials to finish vital assignments, and motivate them to strive for a higher position and to set a higher career goal, all of which can increase their confidence and stimulate their ambitions to access higher positions. In addition, organizations also should set goals for themselves in terms of the gender ratio in leadership roles [6]. For instance, companies can make a plan that 50 percent of top management positions are to be filled by women. If women receive this message, they are more likely to have confidence in pursuing career development.

Clarke proposes an idea that mentorship is associated with visibility to development, access to social networking opportunities and financial resources, so mentoring is crucial to female career development [13]. Female mentors are regarded as role models for women, so female mentors may be a better choice than male mentors. However, due to the challenge of accessing female mentors and the lack of female leaders in enterprises, recruiting external female mentors can be considered as an effective approach [11]. Nevertheless, a study reveals that female employees prefer male mentors [14]. This may be because female employees regard female managers as Queen Bees and believe that women are not willing to offer help to women [14]. Therefore, if companies adopt the women-mentor-women approach, they should give some focus on the relationship between female workers and female mentors. A new mentoring method called "reverse mentoring" could also be applied, which refer to junior employees mentoring female managers so as to assist them to have a deeper insight into problems that junior employees face [11].

Networking promotes career advancement by offering greater access to information and resources, and staffs tend to get more important assignments, advancement opportunities and rewards through networks [13]. As a consequence, it is of significance to offer women networking opportunities to help them achieve promotion. However, some female employees still find it difficult to establish and maintain networks. This may be because they are not aware of spending time on networking [13]. Therefore, the female development program should also raise women's networking awareness and teach them networking skills.

## **4. Summary**

In conclusion, unequal career development opportunities for women have been regarded as a problem for a long time. This article illustrates that barriers to women's career success include gender role stereotypes, family responsibilities, and the lack of supports from companies such as leadership

engagement, mentoring and networking opportunities. To eliminate these obstacles, remedies are offered from the view of human resource development including providing awareness scheme and starting female development program in which career planning, mentoring and networking opportunities are provided.

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