Gender Role Attitudes and Equality at Workplace: A Literature Review

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Abstract - **Gender role attitudes have impacts on the lives of women around the globe irrespective of being employed or not. Women's increasing participation in the world of work and the revolution in gender knowledge which considered gender as a social construction have attracted the attention of world leaders on gender equality and empowering women. Organisations being social entities, prevailing gender role attitudes in respective cultures result in reproducing gender inequality within organizations with the use of organisational policies, practices and relations. Literature highlights that irrespective of the major efforts made by different institutions such as the United Nations, prevalence of gender role attitudes and the presence of gender inequality in organisations are equally significant in the global North as well as in the global South.**

Key Words - Women, Gender role attitudes, Gender inequality, Organisational factors

I. INTRODUCTION

Attitudes towards the ascribed roles for gender or 'gender roles' as they are commonly known, affect the lives of women and men around the globe. These impacts shape and reshape different facets of their lives such as personal, work, social etc. This scenario has evolved for a long time and has been researched in different perspectives. Thus apart from recognizing the differences in sex, in the past decades the revolution in gender knowledge has resulted in the recognition of gender as a social phenomenon.

Understanding the significance of gender differences within different facets of life, it was considered by the world political leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit held in year 2000. In this summit the world leaders have agreed to achieve eight (08) major Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) by the year 2015, within which promoting gender equality and empowering women has been included as one of the MDG's (United Nations Millennium Development Goals) followed by including the same to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) to be achieved by 2030[27].

Against this backdrop, organizations being social entities serving different human needs are an important factor to be considered with regard to gender equality and empowering women. This is mainly due to the increasing number of women world over entering into the labor force day by day [28]. In contrast however much the developments take place in the 'gender' arena, according to Acker(2009) women still do not hold top leadership positions in organizations of the wealthy industrialized countries. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, a developing country, in the global north there are no women in boards of directors' in 70% (approx) of large private sector organizations [13]

When taken the view of an organization, the gender role attitudes prevailing among its members affect the way they make decisions and develop and maintain relationships within day-to-day activities. Hence it is of immense value to study such behavior to understand the prevalence of equality in organizations, if the world as a whole to succeed in achieving the SDG of ensuring gender equality and empowering women. 'Gender' is the most crucial factor in a study of this nature and it must be noted that this is a term that cannot be easily defined. One cannot just do it by looking at a person's anatomy, but in a deeper sense its meaning goes beyond the categorization of female and male. In a broader sociological perspective gender can be defined as a concept which is determined socially or in other words a social construction. People's mind sets are conditioned socially to assign specific traits and attributes to respective genders. According to Ely and Meyerson (2000)

> Gender is an individual characteristic marked by one's biological category as male or female. Sex-role socialization produces individual differences in attitudes and behaviors between men and women [7]

With the above views it is clear that gender is a clear social construct. Accordingly, women and men play their respective roles in life decided by the prevailing cultural values, beliefs, norms and assumptions. These are the gender roles with a prescribed set of attitudes and behavior, which the society expect to play by respective gender identities.

A society being a collection of people the common way of looking at things gives them a unique identity. Hofstede (1999) name this identity as 'culture' which he defines as the collective programming of the mind that differentiates one set of people from another. Thus gender appropriate behavior or gender role is a product of culturally specific values, beliefs, basic assumptions and so on.

Gender role attitudes prevailing in cultures ascribe certain qualities as of women irrespective of their nationality, race, religion, caste and class. As a result gender role attitudes on women affect their lives due to the assigning of socially accepted behavior that result in certain negative consequences such as limiting of study to specific study streams and employ/ not employ in some of the jobs. Impact of gender role attitudes is even visible in work organizations and to a greater extent woman tends to play their respective gender roles within organizations which can limit their scope and capacity to work within organizations in an equal manner. Acker(2006) studying the above issue in the context of United States(US) and the industrialized nations notes that organisations are one of the terrains in the US and other industrial countries within which much of the social and economic inequality is created.

Findings of such nature enunciate the need to study the issue of inequality with in organizations around the globe. Consequently, this paper is written with the major objective of identifying the factors governed by gender role attitudes and their impact on prevalence of equality in organizations. This is done through an extensive study and analysis of existing literature. Scope of the study limits to studying the literature related to organizations in Sri Lanka and in Western developed countries, mainly the US.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE
Within the literature review attention is paid to identify the organizational factors governed by gender role attitudes. When carefully analyzing the existing literature, it is evident that a plethora of factors in organizations are governed by gender role attitudes. In contrast the study focuses on organization structure, organizational policies and practices, interpersonal relations, ideal work norm and work expectations and work family interface as the broader organisational factors that have an impact on women at work due to the prevailing gender role attitudes.

Organization structure
Responsibility on work and authority to make decisions are divided among employees depending on the type of structure

adopted by the organization. It is argued that traditional 'bureaucracy' is the steepest structure. It has a hierarchical structure based on legalized formal authority where all the major decisions are made at top of the structure. In contrast lean organizations with team structures distribute the decision making authority among employees. Hence equality within any structure can be maintained if the positions in the structure are divided equally among women and men.

A careful journey through related literature reveals that men are holding a majority of top positions in organizations. As found by Meyerson and Fletcher (2005) irrespective of women's enormous gains in the business world, women still comprise only 10% of senior managers in Fortune 500 companies.

Morgan (1997) cites a same experience and discusses about the 'glass ceiling' effect due to which women can see opportunities at the top of their organizations but the path is often blocked by the gender biases. In contrast, opportunity structures and job markets are structured in such a way that enable men to achieve positions of prestige and power more easily than women.

Acker(2006) quotes
> A study of engineers in Norway found that women in small, collegial engineering firms gained recognition and advancement more easily than in an engineering department in a big bureaucracy[1].

Jayaweera et al (2008) reveal the following with regards to Sri Lankan organizations. In the directorates of large private sector establishments listed under twenty different areas only 6.1% were women. Also note worthy is the fact that in their board of directors 68.2% of private large establishments had no women.

Adding to the same point, Amarasuriya (1995) discusses the situation in the fields of science and technology and research and development in Sri Lanka. Although women's representation is high in the fields of science and technology they are found mainly in the middle grades as research officers or as administrative officers. In contrast they rarely reach managerial or decision making positions

Analysis of literature in developed countries and in Sri Lanka unearths the hidden truth of inequality implanted in organizational hierarchies. This has become the same for developed countries in the global south as well as for Sri Lanka, a developing country in the global north.

Organizational policies and practices

Organizational policies and practices are in place to facilitate the achievement of organizational goals. Most of such policies are related to managing employees. Recruitment, hiring, job evaluation, performance appraisal, training and development and rewards are some of such policies while supervisory and controlling mechanisms are some of the practices.

Existing literature has evidence to prove that gender inequality is ingrained in organizational policies and practices. Acker (2006) quotes as follows.

> Recruitment, hiring and promotion are processes of finding the workers most suited for particular positions. From the perspective of employers the gender and race of existing job holders at least partially define who is suitable[1].

Holding a similar gender role attitude, Sri Lankan organizations prefer men to women. As expressed by Malhothra (1997) Sri Lankan organisations prefer men to women. Some employers are of the view that women's reproductive role may disrupt the flow of the work force. Jayaweera (2002) elaborates the consequences of Malhotra's findings and highlights that recruitment of women in to decision making positions is minimal in the public and private sector organisation.

Apart from recruitment and hiring, wages too contribute to gender inequality. Acker (2006) states that

> The size of wage differences in organizations also varies, often with the height of the hierarchy. Also, in the US in 2003, the average CEO earned 185 times the earnings of the average worker[1].

These figures become important because broadening the degree of inequality in organizations most of the CEO positions are held by males.

It is interesting to note at this point a research finding on men's (especially union activists) resistance towards an equitable wage structure. In the Oregon pay equity project (Acker, 2006), some male unionists could not believe that women's work might be as skilled as theirs and thus deserve higher pay. The men had maintained their objection even though their own wages do not get lowered if the women's wages were increased. This finding highlights two important issues. First, it is the gender role attitudes of men and second the under representation of women within employee unions.

Not deviating from the Western norm, Sri Lanka too practices discrimination with regards to salaries and wages. Herath (2010) highlights that within both urban and rural sectors women are paid half the wage of a male.

Apart from wage structures, supervisory practices are another aspect that leads to inequality with in organizations. Acker's study in Swedish banks found that women and men in the same entry level job classification were assigned to different duties by their supervisors; men had duties that led to promotions but women did not [2].

Similar practices can be found in the Sri Lankan context. This may be influenced by the view of women need time off for rearing children and that disturbs the smooth functioning of work [18]. Jayewardene and Seneviratne's (2005) case study on a leading biscuit manufacturing company found that majority of women employees have chosen a career path that encourages them to be more passive and feminine symbols.

Interpersonal relations (Formal and informal)

Interpersonal relations at work, as well as away from work have a critical impact in the development and maintenance of trust and positive feelings among employees in any organization. Although the quality of interpersonal relationships alone is not sufficient to produce worker productivity, it significantly contribute to it mainly by maintaining harmony.

Accordingly it is significant to assess the contribution of interpersonal relationships towards gender inequality as it has it's a direct impact on organizational productivity. Acker (2006) states as follows.

> The interaction practices that re-create gender and racial inequalities are often subtle and unspoken thus difficult to document. White men may devalue and exclude white women and people of color by not listening to them in meetings, by not inviting them to join a group going out for a drink after work, by not seeking their opinion on work place problems. Other practices such as sexual harassment are open and obvious to the victim but not so obvious to others[1].

Sri Lankan context has no much of a difference, as harassment (general as well as sexual) at work place is a 'publicly known secret'. Bound by rigid cultural ties, women are not at all ready to reveal such, as it will tarnish the image of them and will be labeled as bad women[4].

Ideal work norm and work expectations
Paid work obligations lead to the development of ideal work norms and work expectations. Attitudes on ideal work norms expect either genders to fit in to such norms forgetting the unpaid family care work and obligations shouldered mostly by women. Kelly (2010) gathers relevant literature into a nut shell to explain the above scenario.

When feminist scholars talk about "gendered organizations" (Acker 1990,1992; Britton 2000; Ely and Meyerson 2000b), they note that most workplaces are organized as if paid work is the only, or at least the primary, responsibility of employees. White-collar workers - especially managers and professionals - are expected to work long hours, arrange their outside responsibilities around their paid work, and be willing to relocate or travel as requested (Bailyn 1993). These behaviors signal appropriate devotion to one's work (Blair-Loy 2003) and are expected to continue throughout adulthood (Moen and Roehling 2005). These expectations, sometimes called the "ideal worker norm" (J. C. Williams 2000), reinforce gender inequality in the workplace. Because of differences in men's and women's family work (Bianchi et al. 2000) as well as different cultural expectations of mothers and fathers (Hays 1996; Townsend 2002), women, and especially mothers, are less likely to follow the expected pattern of continuous, full-time employment (Hynes and Clarkberg 2005; Stone 2007). Women and mothers in particular, are less likely to live up to these expectations and less likely to reap the economic rewards associated with being an ideal worker [16]

Following similar norms it is the belief in the Sri Lankan context that women are incapable of sticking to the ideal work norm and hence should be positioned in traditionally and socially constructed occupations such as nursing, teaching, and secretarial work. According to Jayewardene and Seneviratne (2005) a leading biscuit manufacturing company in Sri Lanka views the female labor as 'dowry seekers' for their marriage or 'part time' job occupants.

Work family interface
Working women around the globe face the challenge of balancing the responsibilities and commitments assigned to their roles at home and at work place. Kane and Sanchez (1994) combine relevant literature to clarify the above situation.
One particularly consistent finding in the literature on gender-role attitudes is that acceptance of women's involvement in the labor force is greater than acceptance of changes in the domestic division of labor. Changing roles in the marketplace seem to be more palatable to both men and women than do changing roles in the home (Conover & Sapiro 1992; Herzog & Bachman 1982; Mason & Bumpass 1975; Morgan & Walker 1983; Osmond & Martin 1975; Quarm 1983; Thornton & Freedman 1979; see also Spence, Deaux, and Helmreich's 1985 literature review). It appears that many consider it appropriate for women to enter the labor force as long as they continue to provide domestic labor as well[15].

Nature and extent of prevalence of the above situation in Sri Lanka has been discussed by Jayaweera (2005) as follows: even if women are employed the gender division of labor in the household was not found to have changed significantly. The study confirmed the findings of most research that the domestic gender division of labor continues to be inequitable despite the increasing responsibilities and work of women as income earners.

The above analysis of existing literature highlights the factors that are governed by gender role attitudes and how such factors contribute to the development and prevalence of inequality in organizations. Further, review of literature reveals that, specific and clear differences cannot be found with regards to the above issue in developed countries in the global North and in Sri Lanka, a developing country in the global South.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it must be stated that however much the governments, organizations and other social groups have attempted, there has not been a perceptible change in gender role attitudes around the globe. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) notes as follows.

> "Our analysis suggests, then, that although changing socioeconomic conditions and personal and collective resistance do gradually modify cultural beliefs about gender, the core structure of the beliefs is not easy to erode. Despite some narrowing of the gap in women's reports of their own instrumental traits compared to men's it is unwise to be sanguine about the inevitable decline of gender inequality" [23].

Similarly Gunatilaka (2018) found that in the Garment industry in Sri Lanka majority of the women are placed either at the shop floor level or the supervisory level and women carryout most of the household chores but there are minor changes in the domestic gender division of labour when women are main breadwinners.

Consequently, women experience inequality at work as well as at home in different degrees. Except for few women who challenge the inequalities and broaden their path ways, majority still remain in socially constructed occupations, tolerating inequality.

The impact of above factors (governed by gender role attitude leading to inequality), when taken as single, isolated incidents is negligible. But, it is important to understand that women have to endure the accumulated impacts of the above factors at work as well as at home.

When facing such impacts, as human beings, it is natural that women will become less productive, poorly committed and dissatisfied. The effect of such conditions in turn can result in negative impacts on the organizations, respective families and the society at large. Hence it is timely and relevant to develop programs at organizational and social levels to change the existing gender role attitudes and to replace with the appropriate ones. But changing attitudes is not a simple and trouble-free task. Major barrier with in such an effort is the culture with in which the basic assumptions, values, beliefs etc. are embedded. These are the building blocks of the social construction of gender leading to the development of gender role attitudes.

What is necessary at this juncture is a strong discourse around the globe, led by social and behavioral scientists and erudite and experienced managers to develop change programs that are tailor made for specific cultures in order to enable people unlearn the prevailing gender role attitudes and to replace them with requisite ones so as to treat everyone equally irrespective of their gender. Such programs should emphasize the need for institutionalizing the change within organizations.

Successful implementation of such programs world over will enable organizations to develop a set of satisfied and committed women employees and to make use of their maximum capacity for organizational effectiveness. Increased participation of women might lead to unearth some hidden basic assumptions about work, policies, systems, values etc. Some of these might be having negative impacts not only on women but to the organization as a whole. Getting to know such valuable truths will be of immense importance when facing the ever changing environmental conditions.

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