The persistent barrier of structural sexism

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Structural sexism and patriarchy continue to be significant determiners of discrimination and inequality. This inequality originated from the way society traditionally defined gender roles, assigning women to domestic labour and child-rearing, while men were expected to be leaders and providers. Girls were discouraged from pursuing education, reinforcing the belief that their only hope was to find a husband to take care of them. This myth of female inferiority has persisted through generations and continues to affect women today.

Religion and culture contribute to the entrenchment of discrimination against women by prescribing specific gender roles. These expectations pressure women to conform to societal norms and obey their husbands to gain acceptance. Women's dependency on men for survival further reinforces these roles, leading to a social status similar to that of children. Gender roles are used to control women and to place them in a position of perpetual subordination.

A tragic example of this systemic sexism is the case of Mahsa Amini, who died in police custody in Tehran last year after being arrested for “improperly” wearing her hijab. Her blood is on the hands of a regime who believes that they have a right to enforce what women wear. In fundamentalist religious communities around the world women are relegated to a social status equivalent to that of children.

Structural sexism extends to the workplace where historically defined roles continue to influence job segregation, resulting in lower pay, limited advancement opportunities, and hostile work environments for women. Women are still considered to be inferior, weak, and incapable. They are often overlooked for advancement because of these myths. We all know that there is no truth in the myths, but they persist despite the evidence to the contrary. The excuse of unconscious bias is no longer acceptable in my view. Men want to preserve their position of privilege and are using their position of power to maintain the status quo.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) programmes in organisations have been slow to make meaningful progress in addressing gender inequality because they often focus solely on women. To effect real change, both men and women must engage in open conversations addressing the root causes of gender inequality. Safe spaces for these discussions should be created within organizations where these conversations can take place.

What we are seeing is the practice of social closure, defined as “the drawing of boundaries between groups in a process of subornation in which one group secures its advantages by closing off the opportunities of another group that it defines as inferior and ineligible”.

Gender inequality is a societal problem that urgently requires redefining traditional gender roles, acknowledging the changing role of women in the past century. By sharing domestic responsibilities more equitably, women can have a fair chance to advance their careers and improve their economic and social status. The burden of domestic labour should not be solely on women, as this perpetuates inequality.

Moreover, the current defined gender roles are inefficient in utilizing human resources fully. In today's industrial and technological society, a nation and economy cannot thrive when it depends on only 50% of its human potential. Equal opportunities for all individuals to reach their full potential are essential for the well-being of families and the economy.

Women need to take responsibility for changing their own limiting beliefs about who they are and their own worthiness. Women should be equipped to start having the tough conversations they need to have with their partners to address the issue of equity in the sharing of domestic responsibilities and changing their subordinate position at home and at work.

Overcoming structural sexism and patriarchy requires a collective effort to redefine gender roles, promote equity in sharing domestic responsibilities, and challenge limiting beliefs. Organizations should foster inclusive environments where meaningful conversations about gender inequality can occur. Embracing gender equality will lead to a more prosperous and harmonious society for everyone.