

# Gender Stereotypes Limit Women's Opportunities in Working Life in India

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Only women can be caregivers and raise children. Women should stay at home. Women's careers are not as important as men's. These examples are not facts but gender stereotypes. They are typical in India but also occur in other countries.

Gender stereotypes are over-generalisations of the gender differences and attributes of people. Such stereotypes legitimise the distribution of sexes across specific gendered roles. Women are assumed to be emotional, gentle, social and nurturing. They are often seen as perfectionists who are low in self-confidence, risk-averse and unwilling to highlight their capabilities and achievements. Women are deemed fitting only to tasks and roles which require these attributes.

According to gender stereotypes, men are expected to be self-confident, rational, ambitious and decisive. These features are seen as, for example, characteristics of successful managers. However, practice and research have revealed that very few women, men or others embody such simplistic generalisations. These stereotypes hardly communicate reliable information about people.

According to Gerdeman (2019) in the Harvard Business School Research & Ideas series, gender stereotypes suppress women's self-confidence. Her article says that, due to gender stereotypes, women lack the confidence needed to compete in fields in which men dominate, such as science, math and technology. This prevents women from competing for professional roles and positions which they believe are beyond gender stereotypes. Thus, gender stereotyping constrains women's opportunities at work and other spheres of life.

Why is it important for India to underscore, discuss and change gender stereotypes? Our answer is moral and economic reasons.

The Global Gender Gap Report (2020) by the World Economic Forum shows that India ranks 112th of 153 countries in gender equality. Moreover, India ranks 145th in women's labour participation rate. Consequently, India has one of the lowest labour force participation rates of women globally. Women face continuous discrimination at work in the country. In particular, top management positions are not easily accessible (Deloitte, 2020). Negative stereotyping and discriminatory treatment against women characterise Indian society in general.

Improving gender equality is a matter of just treatment of genders. The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen (2003), who is from India, said that developing women's opportunities is a moral imperative that will enable them to function in life as fully as possible.

Gender equality increases economic prosperity. It benefits all people in society: women, men, girls and boys. The McKinsey Global Institute (2018) argued recently that India could increase its gross domestic product (GDP) by more than 18 percent by giving more opportunities to women. Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund (2015) estimated that the GDP of India can increase by 27 percent by 2025 if women participated in the economy at the same rate as men.

In any case, achieving gender equality would have a substantial positive effect on the Indian economy. In particular, higher participation of women in the workforce is a key factor that can promote the economic growth of the country. Why not use this advantage for the benefit of all?

In our opinion, one reason for India's low ranking in gender equality and women's labour market participation is the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes throughout society and in social relationships. Speaking about women's working life in India, Chapman and Mishra (2019) stated that India's patriarchal stereotypes and norms that stress men's power over women are a problem. Gender stereotypes define strict and traditional roles for women and men. They constrain women's agency, freedom to work and career opportunities.

In our experience, stereotypes often prevent women from voicing their ideas and compel them to remain silent in discussions despite having appropriate and helpful views. Bertrand Russell highlighted this aspect: 'One of the painful things about our time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and understanding are filled with doubt and indecision' (Bertrand Russell Quotes About Certainty).

Gender stereotypes begin limiting women's opportunities from childhood. Parents in some parts of India are uninterested in their daughters' education purely because they are women. The preference for sons, which originates from their perceived importance as caregivers of their parents in old age, is connected to poorer outcomes for daughters (Sharma, 2016).

Parents sometimes try to dissuade their daughters from taking up careers that are not feminine in the parents' opinion. Parents may also discourage their daughters from returning to work after having children. At workplaces, people's eyebrows are raised when women assert themselves, make tough decisions or aim to take responsibilities that are not considered feminine.

Gender stereotyping is a hurdle for women in many Indian workplaces. People's mindsets, attitudes and behaviour in society, workplaces, families and social relationships should be transformed to resolve this problem.

Universities and higher education institutions need to advance this transformation by emphasising equality, equity and inclusiveness in their strategies, practices and teaching. We believe that gender-sensitive career counselling is an option for this.

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