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GENDER AS A FACTOR OF DIFFICULT WORK SITUATIONS:
ONLINE SURVEY IN RUSSIA

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Abstract

An attempt has been made to investigate the origins of difficult work situations determined by gender. Gender-role theory and the theory of ambivalent sexism are actively used to explain the reproducibility of gender inequality, which pertains despite the legislative and social practices of reducing it. The study involved an online survey of 32 participants who were not informed about the gender aspects of the survey. The analysis of the statements revealed that tension between genders is generated by perceived gender opposition and subordination, which is actualized by the organizational culture itself, first of all by its hierarchy. A content analysis of the respondents' statements about the difficulties encountered at work and their coping strategies, made it possible to identify situations of a painful choice "between two evils" that female employees face in their experience. These are the dilemmas of subjectivity (the choice between dependence and independence in the "masculine" world of professionalism) and the dilemmas of impression management (the choice between the feminine and masculine behavior). A descriptive model of behavioral strategies for overcoming androcentrism is proposed, which includes the strategies of competition, adaptation, dismissing or equality. The woman's strategy choice depends on the solution of these dilemmas. Working women with children face another dilemma, the so-called "motherhood penalty": you are either a bad mother or a bad worker. It is concluded that gender opposition takes hidden, ambivalent forms and is not always accessible to human awareness. Gender equality in Russia often remains a declared, but not practiced idea.

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1. Introduction

The socio-psychological view on the problem of gender involves the study of gender stereotypes and their influence in different spheres of human life. Stereotypes become social norms, prescribing appropriate behavior for men and women, as well as forming the attitude of people around them. Research indicates that stereotypes, as a derivative of the social context and social structures, influence the emergence and maintenance of sexism and gender inequality (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

Human society has done a lot to reduce the gender gap in healthcare and education, but it is still far from equal income for women and men (Dorius & Firebaugh, 2010).

Psychologists describe several mechanisms of persistence of discrimination. First, according to gender-role theory (Eagly et al., 2000), women and men are represented differently in different social roles. Men are more likely to be leaders, while women are involved in childcare and household chores. The gender-based distribution of roles leads to an associative perception that these roles require different sets of abilities, personality traits and inclinations. The biological ability of women to bear children leads to the perception of them as vulnerable, weak and in need of protection, and, as a result, men are strong and responsible for them (Littlefield et al., 2015).

Secondly, it is the nature of intergroup relations, that is, relations between men and women as social groups. Relations between any groups are characterized by two basic criteria: the distribution of power and the valence of the relationship (hostility or benevolence). According to the theory of ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001), gender discrimination contains both negative and positive prejudices against men and women. Women, for example, may be perceived as requiring nurturing and patronage (a phenomenon of “protective paternalism”), and this fact has both desirable and undesirable consequences for women, because it essentially demonstrates gender inequality.

In an organizational context, gender can also be perceived not as a neutral concept, but as a historically and culturally fixed system of relations. Organizations in which gender becomes visible and meaningful are called “gendered organizations” (Acker, 2006), and they create the conditions for reproducing inequalities, embodied in intra-organizational politics and culture.

The evidence of gender in any context influences the manifestation of gender-specific behavior, that is, behavior that would correspond to stereotypical expectations (Ryan et.al., 2004). In the meantime, it has been proven that stereotype threat can alter the quality and efficiency of work performance and influence achievement (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

Gender discrimination, despite the efforts of mankind to eliminate it, continues to reproduce taking hidden and ambivalent forms and leading to invisible barriers in women's careers. A new paradigm in explaining the persistence of the gender gap is the gendered organization approach. There are very few studies in line with this approach, in Russia they are not represented at all.

3. Research Questions

We were interested in how much women perceive the difficulties they experience at work to be related to their gender. In fact, we investigated the subjective dimension of gender inequality in an organizational context, without asking respondents direct questions about gender inequality. In particular, we have concentrated on the following issues.

- **How often will women mark their gender as a significant factor in experiencing difficult work situations?**

What kind of situations are these? How do women explain this connection themselves? What are they doing to resolve these difficulties? What difficulties women do not associate with gender?

- **Will women talk about gender-linked career benefits?**

What are these benefits? Do they compensate for the difficulties associated with being female?

4. Purpose of the Study

Difficult work situations can be, on the one hand, the context for the emergence of categorization and stereotypes, like any stressful situation, but, on the other hand, they can also be a consequence of the functioning of gender stereotypes. This study was organized to understand the relationship of gender self-categorization of women with the peculiarities of their experience (the emergence and resolution of difficulties at work).

5. Research Methods

The study was qualitative and involved an online survey, in which respondents were asked to anonymously answer questions regarding the difficulties they faced on their professional path and strategies for resolving them. The questions were open-ended. The participants were not aware of the gender aspects of the study. Closed questions about gender and about the influence of gender on the emergence and living of a difficult situation were asked at the very end.

The study was conceived as a pilot project. The sample included 32 women (three men were excluded due to non-representativeness) of 22–47 years old (the average age was 32.2 years); 84.3 % were employed at the time of the survey.

6. Findings

The description of the results is illustrated with quotes from direct statements of the respondents. Among the most significant results are the following.

1. Gender as a significant factor in experiencing difficult work situations was noted by 37.9 % of women (they chose the answer “it would be easier for a person of the opposite sex to cope”). Of these, 45.5 % have children. "Maternity wall", "motherhood penalty" (Correll et al., 2007) are phenomena that

describe the limitations of women in the workplace. "Women are hampered by the insurmountable barrier of having to live as motherhood and pursue a career at the same time ..." Working mothers face double stigmatization: on the one hand, as a bad mother abandoning her children; on the other hand, as a bad worker, unreliable and incompetent.

2. Among women who did not define gender as a significant factor in experiencing difficult situations, 22.2 % have children. The share of women with children in this category is two times less, which suggests that having children is a factor aggravating the experience of difficulties at work. Social policy aimed at compensating for unequal opportunities for men and women after having children (granting parental leave, social payments for a child for both father and mother on an equal basis) does not fully work.

3. Among women who did not identify gender as a significant factor in experiencing difficult situations, 6 % in their description of the situation and its solution, nevertheless, directly or indirectly mentioned the connection between difficulties at work and their gender: "I did not behave like a *vixen*, picking up *men*. I was working, developing professionally, leaving work late, attending all meetings". That is, a woman, on the one hand, believes that gender did not matter in her situation, but uses gender-colored words. From her statement, it turns out that she abandoned the socially acceptable role of a "warm and caring woman" (and then her belonging to the female sex really loses its meaning in this context) and tried to build her behavior in such a way as to match the male behavior as much as possible within the organizational culture.

4. None of the respondents noted gender as an advantage in difficult work situations. There were women who, at the same time, in free statements about the situation, mentioned these advantages, but characterized them rather ambiguously, as having a downside. "Maybe they *didn't always treat me with respect, but they frankly helped, took care of me...* The work was, maybe, *not very interesting*, but I covered some needs... babysitting with me, perhaps, somehow prohibited my career to rocket up". Treating women as "weak" and in need of protection reflects the stereotypical idea of paternalism, which is also, albeit milder, but a form of sexism.

5. Women associate gender with difficult work situations of the following nature.

- A. Overworked at work, "inability to give up any of the cases." In career development training, women are taught to say "strategic no" to office chores and unwanted social work traditionally attributed to women (Allen, 2006). However, the question remains open: to whom should they say "strategic no"?
- B. Low salaries, not in line with the results obtained, the income of male colleagues and "the market average". "This is a difficult topic for negotiations... the boss did not attend to this issue, despite the regular reminders from me".
- C. "Specific" not serious attitude of the management. Here are some examples: "... I was often not invited to profile events and round tables. It was difficult to prove that a young girl can be smarter than local authorities. " Or: "I created a false impression of my professional suitability by being too inactive and non-conflict character." These statements suggest that women often have to choose between being loved (in a feminine role) and respected (in a masculine role) (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

- D. Difficulties in finding a job, which forced “to get a lower position and salary”. This is especially true for women with children.
- E. "Ceiling" in career growth. Women, in their words, constantly have to "prove that I deserve a promotion." At the same time, women are informally condemned for striving for advancement, while men are condemned for modesty (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010). This is a clear example of De Beauvoir's (2010) idea that the drama of a woman is in the conflict between the claim to define herself as essential one and the demands of the situation that defines her as insignificant. Women are faced with another dilemma: “to gain independence within dependence”.
- F. Competition with male colleagues. In some cases, women immediately put themselves in the position of a loser, and perceive their success as a paradox: "I was promoted ... I am lucky." Indeed, there is a difference in how people perceive the reasons for professional success: women are credited with being lucky and men with high qualifications (Swim & Sanna, 1996). In another situation, a woman chose to fight with a male colleague for her right to represent the project. She concluded that “you should not be afraid to firmly defend your interests, even if you (as happened to me) are considered a shrill. Although it was unpleasant for me to speak tough, I did not get personal and did not raise my voice, but still it seemed to me that I was a brawler... although a man in my place would have behaved much tougher without hesitation". Here again the effect of gender-tinged perception of assertive behavior manifests itself: “he is assertive, she is aggressive,” which, of course, creates the basis for conflict experiences.
- G. Difficulties in combining work responsibilities with family life. This is sometimes so difficult that some people say that the work-life balance is a myth. "My family was not ready to move... I returned to a position that was not higher in terms of career but gave me the opportunity to fully reunite with my family."
- H. Appointment to a leadership position or position that requires “certain personal qualities—perseverance, courage, the ability to stand up for oneself,” that is, masculine behavior, dominance, aggressiveness. "I applied for a male role—the role of the boss". Participation in a field conference on behalf of the company was also recognized as a male role; in another case, work associated with a lot of stress was also perceived as a male one. A woman in this role must behave masculine in order to cope with it and appear competent. But by behaving masculinely, she is ostracized by those around her, because she must at the same time remain a woman.

6. Women do not associate the four types of difficult work situations with gender: low pay for work in their specialty; unfamiliar professional tasks, change of profession, subjectivity in the assessment of work.

A thematic analysis of behavioral responses to difficult work situations allowed us to generalize and structure them, highlighting four basic strategies for overcoming gender inequality in work situations: competition, adjustment, care and equality (Fig. 01).

Note that all the strategies we have proposed are based on the woman's reaction to the question: "What to do?" In the case of choosing a competitive strategy, a woman behaves offensively, defiantly, her goal is to rebel against androcentrism by proving gender superiority. The adaptation strategy assumes that a woman accepts the "masculine" structure of the professional environment and begins to play according to the imposed rules, alienating her own uniqueness. The woman resorting to the leave strategy realizes that she does not want and is not ready to sacrifice the "female" self and the interests of her family for the sake of professional development, and she removes herself from the world of career claims. And finally, the strategy of equality shows the desire of women to promote the idea of a multipolar professional world, actively debunking stereotypes about both men and women, while appreciating the peculiarities and equality of the gender.

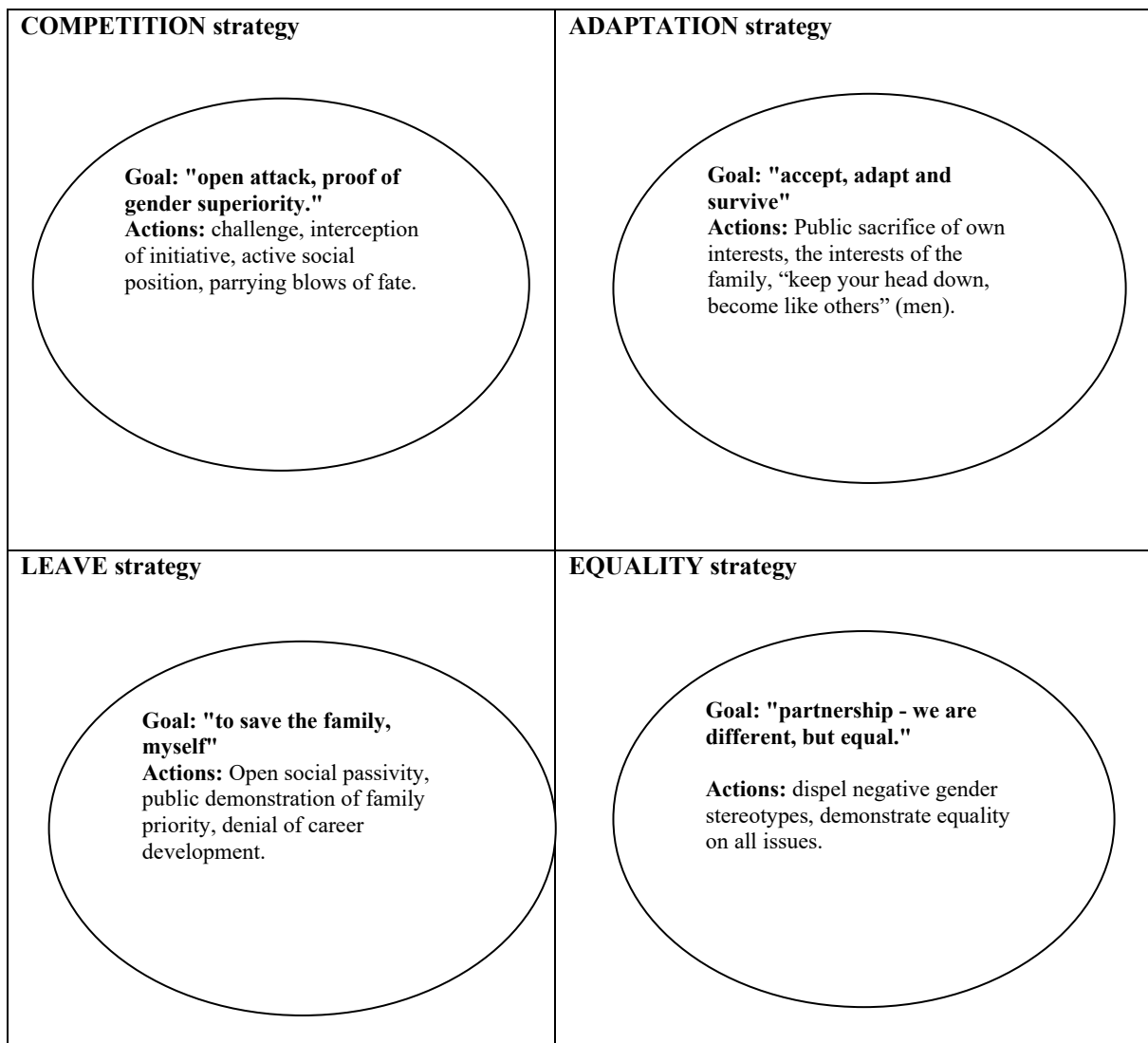


Figure 1. Strategies women report for overcoming gender inequality in the work context

7. Conclusion

The study made it possible to formulate the following conclusions.

1. The women in the sample recognize that difficulties in dealing with work situations in the context of organizational culture and/or structure are related to gender. Women often point out that gender is a significant factor in both the occurrence and the experience of difficult work situations. It is possible that this circumstance is associated with a number of dilemmas faced by a professional woman. Among the main dilemmas, we attributed the dilemma of subjectivity ("autonomy or dependence in an androcentric world") and the dilemma of impression management ("feminine or masculine behavior", "either love or respect", "either overload and underestimation, or refusal of unnecessary responsibilities and ostracism", "either professional competence, or femininity", "promotion to "male" positions, or avoidance of punishment for the "masculine" behavior required for them", etc.). The way in which a woman solves these dilemmas for herself determines the strategy of her behavior: competition, adaptation, leave, or equality.

2. It is motherhood that creates the gender gap and makes it most obvious. The "wall of motherhood" is erected when a woman wants to get a job, a promotion, or a raise. She has to solve another dilemma: "Either a bad mother or a bad worker". A working mother deviates from key organizational norms and rules, and is unable to meet the standard of an effective worker—to be ambitious, pleasant to talk to, available at any time to complete a production task.

3. It is argued that all employees in the organization should be active, but this requires weakening the negative gender stereotypes existing in society and the social consequences of their influence. Since sexism in the working context turns into veiled, ambivalent, forms, some aspects of situations described by women as difficult, but not related to gender, turn out to be indirectly related to it, which is reflected in speech formulations. Organizational culture has a significant impact on the career of women, establishing certain "unspoken" requirements: women must work actively if they want to avoid negative stereotypes related to their gender; if a woman wants high achievements in the career, she must spend additional energy, more than men striving for this position. Unfortunately, the paradox and conflict potential of modern organizational culture lies in the declared, but not practiced, equality of workers of different genders.

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