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Women at Work: Barriers, Penalties, and Syndromes

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This article analyzes different barriers, penalties, and syndromes that women face in the workplace, showing different types of discrimination towards women and the problem of gender blindness. A selected collection of examples is presented. Information was obtained from published articles, international organizations, as well as media posts, especially management-related publications. Numerous examples became more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the first female recession registered in history.

Keywords: Workplace; gender differences; gender blindness; examples; barriers; penalties; syndromes; shecession

I. Introduction

Discrimination against women has been common in different areas of social, political, and economic life and can be related to what has been called “gender blindness.” Gender blindness refers to the inability to realize that there is a conscious or unconscious bias regarding women, particularly in terms of their performance in certain professions and positions (Cavaghan 2012). The idea of not being able – or not wanting – to see the problem in the workplace can be due to the fact that there are certain visible and invisible conditions that promote penalties towards women, including salaries, lack of opportunities for growth and development, low levels of participation, and even everyday mistreatment. These experiences, although they can vary in different countries due to specific cultural traits, still hold certain similarities.

Historically, many occupations were segregated by sex, arguably because they were hard, difficult, or dangerous. Although there is more female presence in many sectors and industries, and there has been a shift in gender roles where women have been entering professions traditionally dominated by men, there are still certain jobs and positions that are either male or female dominated. In numerous sectors, work is delivered or carried out by women but still led by men, such as the medical profession. Most health services have a majority of women in frontline occupations.

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II. Understanding the shecession

The term shecession was coined by C. Nicole Mason, president and chief executive officer of the Institute for Women Policy Research (IWPR); it describes a recession that affects women disproportionately due to job and income losses, as well as housing and food insecurity (Holpuch 2021), with both immediate and long-lasting effects.

In previous recessions, jobs that were most affected belonged to men and were, therefore, “mancessions.” In past recessions, female incomes insulated families because male-dominated industries were the worst hit. In 2008, sectors with predominantly female workforces, such as retail, were on the frontline (ILO 2009).

More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered the first female recession in over 50 years (Alon et al. 2020), and it was the first time since 1948 that female unemployment reached double digits (Haridasani Gupta 2021). The COVID-19 crisis led to more job losses among women, with the most affected groups being the mothers of young children and mothers without partners or relatives who could help share childcare responsibilities following school closures (Ro 2020). In the United States, the shecession hit predominantly non-white females. It was a tie with the highest unemployment rates for women of color and Hispanic women (Haridasani Gupta 2021).

The shecession heavily affected sectors such as hospitality and retail because these sectors employ many women and are also vulnerable to lockdown measures (Ro 2020). Additionally, these jobs were generally underpaid and undervalued, which meant that many of the newly unemployed women now had even less of a financial cushion to fall back on (Haridasani Gupta 2020). The unequal division of labor in many households just added to the burden (Marshall 2021). Household responsibilities for working mothers became overwhelming during the pandemic, as women had to shoulder extra responsibilities.

During the pandemic, women faced what was called the “triple punch” (Cohen 2021) because 1) certain jobs in which women dominated, such as restaurants, retail, and healthcare, closed their doors or were considered high risk for possible contagions; 2) government jobs, mostly handled by women, were stopped; and 3) childcare centers and schools were closed with a shift to remote homeschooling which further pushed women out of their jobs and also prevented them from seeking new work opportunities.

The female recession helps shed light on the vulnerability of women, especially mothers, when major crises occur (Cohe, 2021). Additionally, it brings to the surface the fact that women are more likely to be unemployed than men and also tend to be in lower-paid jobs. Women have some of the worst-paid jobs, frequently working by piece rate and subcontracted and insecure jobs, having little or no access to decent jobs and social protection (UN Women 2017).

In spite of underwhelming conditions and additional obstacles to cope with, women achieved significant progress following the last financial crisis and were doing much better in the labor market. In fact, in the recession resulting from the 2008 crisis, it was women who pulled the economy up; however, the COVID-19 pandemic made them fall behind, creating “permanent scarring” and threatening to wipe out decades of progress as women increasingly started dropping out of the workforce (Rockeman, Pickert, and Saraiva 2020) and were being forced to the sidelines.

III. Traditional gender-based workplace barriers

The number of examples used to describe barriers that women face in the workplace has grown dramatically in the past few years. As can be observed, most of these barriers are transparent, invisible, and “made of glass,” helping to better understand the idea of gender blindness. People

pretend that these barriers are not there because they do not see them, but women who try to surpass them can actually feel the boundaries, and sometimes such barriers are impenetrable no matter how much effort is placed on the job.

The glass ceiling

Perhaps the most common gender barrier in the workplace is the glass ceiling, which refers to an invisible and impenetrable barrier that prevents women from climbing the hierarchical ladder and reaching top positions. Invisible barriers can exist at all salary levels, despite the fact that the term “glass ceiling” was developed to refer to women’s lack of access to the highest levels of organizations (Powell and Butterfield 2015).

The glass floor

This is when there are limits at the lower level of the salary scale where jobs are traditionally held by women and there is a barrier that does not allow men to descend into those lower-paid functions. They prevent men from working in traditionally feminine occupations which have a low educational requirement and almost no opportunities for advancement, such as the cleaning sector, care services, restaurant services, and hotels, among others (Barnet-Verzat and Wolff 2008).

Glass walls

These are horizontal limits; that is, they prevent women from moving into other areas, specifically those where climbing the hierarchical ladder would be easier. Limits are based on negative or discriminatory profiles towards traditionally feminine sectors such as education, cleaning, and various service sectors, where the participation of women is not allowed in any decision-making process, especially in sectors where economic power is concentrated, preventing opportunities to move up the ranks (Nasser 2018).

Glass doors

This refers to the initial hiring barriers women face when wanting to work for a company (Smith, Caputi, and Critenden 2012), including segregation that occurs throughout the entire recruitment process. These doors can be opened more easily when there are more women already working for the company. In fact, even a small increase in the number of women entering through that door to a managerial position dramatically increases other women’s chances of being hired or promoted into that desired position (Hittleman 1996).

Glass cliff

Women are more likely to occupy precarious or high-risk leadership roles (Ryan and Haslam 2005). Women then become victims of negative criticism and are blamed for the results of previous leadership (Esposito 2021), finding themselves in crisis situations. Women are not seeking high-risk positions; they accept them because they are the only ones they are given (Darouei and Pluut 2018). This leads to extensive stress (Powell and Butterfield 2015).

Glass labyrinth

The longest and most tedious path that women have to travel to reach the same position as a man is the glass labyrinth. There will be closed and dead-end roads, and they will have to go around multiple times to get to where they want to go (Gabarró Rubio 2020). The complexity of the maze reflects the context and specific barriers they face (Carli and Eagley 2016).

Glass elevator/escalator

It is the quick access that men have to participate in leadership positions and to continually advance in traditionally feminine areas. These are the strategies and actions that facilitate the rapid promotion of men without major setbacks (Casini 2016). When men arrive at these jobs, they step over women as if there was an invisible elevator or escalator taking them to higher positions faster. Apparently, men who make the move into these areas have greater benefits than those who stay in male-dominated areas (Goudreau 2012).

The two-way mirror

Analogy of mirrors used to interview criminals or for marketing tests, where on one side people can see those being interviewed, and on the other, the interviewees can only see their own reflection (Bend and Fielden 2021). It is frequently used when there are disabilities, and the organization cannot see beyond that due to a lack of understanding, stereotypes, prevailing prejudices, and discriminatory practices (Bend and Fielden 2021).

The glass house

When working conditions feel like a prison in which women have to adapt to behavioral patterns within masculine cultures in organizations (Maclaran, Stevens, and Catterall 1997). The glass house reflects not only vertical barriers, such as the glass ceiling, but also horizontal ones that, at the same time, generate an encapsulating environment.

Leaking pipe

Constant loss of female talent as age advances, the loss of participation of women in high positions, and the loss of women in their trajectory toward traditionally masculine scientific and technological areas (Grogan 2019). When women reach high-level positions, they are no longer allowed to participate; and when they start aging, they are let go or decide to leave due to health problems, including menopause and symptoms that bring them a sense of inadequacy.

The fire wall

All barriers that function as limitations to the possibility of accessing the next levels and support systems, even without guarantees (Andersson, Balkmar, and Callerstig 2022; Bendl and Schmidt 2010).

The concrete ceiling

Specific barriers suffered by ethnic minorities and racial discrimination that, in some countries, limit any possible access to better working conditions (Cohen 1998). This barrier does not allow one to see what is above, which causes physical and emotional exhaustion. An example

is the severe underrepresentation of African American women in high-level positions (Khosroshahi 2021).

The sticky floor/sticky ladder

It describes the same phenomenon as glass ceilings, and the analogy is that women stay stuck to the ground as if the ground traps them, preventing them from moving forward or upward in the workplace. This metaphor has also been used to describe barriers that exist in the workplace because women are not willing to break them, resulting in situations where women themselves sabotage their careers and are considered responsible for self-imposing barriers in the workplace (Smith, Caputo, and Crittenden 2012).

IV. Penalties women face in the workplace

Women face multiple penalties in the workplace due to the simple fact of being a woman. Most of the penalties are economic, and women end up making less money than their male counterparts. In fact, the United Nations has suggested that women around the world earn an average of 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, and this “persists in all countries and across all sectors, because women’s work is under-valued and women tend to be concentrated in different jobs than men” (UN Women 2017). This difference is so important because if women played identical roles to those of men, it could add 26% to the global domestic product in 2025 (Woetzel et al. 2015; Horne, Khatiwada, and Kuhn 2016).

Furthermore, women have faced the loss of lifetime earnings when they raised their children. They have also faced slower career progression, underemployment, and an unfair share of childcare duties (Wood 2023). This might help explain why most of the poor people in the world are women (Dawson 2019). Sometimes, job prospects were bleak for young women even if they were well educated, and many ended up moving into the informal job market, settling for working conditions that were suboptimal and with low wages.

For centuries, women have faced several penalties when accessing the workforce, which are based on gender norms that hinder the possibility of progress. One of the most relevant aspects of the female penalty is the pay gap. As an example, the PwC’s (2023) Women in Work Index stated that an 18-year-old woman entering the workforce today would not see equal pay in her working lifetime. A selected collection of the most relevant penalties is presented. It is important to note that the most prevalent one is the motherhood penalty.

Pregnancy penalty

The pregnancy penalty can be considered as the penalty for impending pregnancy (Shinall 2021). Around 50 years ago, employers could legally discriminate against pregnant women in the workplace because pregnancy was considered a temporary disability that could limit a woman’s physical activities, and this increased in the long term due to childcare because the work of a parent never stops (Shinall 2021). Nowadays, it is considered unlawful, but pregnant women are often judged and labeled as being less committed, less dependable, less authoritative, more emotional, and more irrational than nonpregnant women in the workforce (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007). Additionally, pregnancy entails numerous changes that can lead to health issues, and women will be off the job for a period of time surrounding the birth of their children, which also affects the way employers see their female workers.

Motherhood penalty and the “mommy track”

The motherhood penalty has been described as the loss in lifetime earnings experienced by women who are raising children and is the most important driver of the gender pay gap (PwC 2023). It is a “systematic disadvantage” that mothers face (Brearley 2021). Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) suggested that the motherhood penalty sometimes has a per-child wage penalty, which increases the traditional pay gap between mothers and non-mothers. Additionally, women are segregated into slower career tracks (hence, the mommy track) and, over time, may display lower commitment due to perceived inequalities and unfairness (Grimshaw and Rubery 2015).

Mothers spend less time in paid jobs across their lifetime than men and childless women, and if they have full-time jobs, they reduce their paid hours when they have children (Scott 2024). The motherhood penalty leads to slower career progression for women as well as underemployment due to the additional unfair share of childcare (PwC 2023). It is the price that women pay for having a family while in the workforce; they get stuck in roles below their capabilities and miss out on opportunities (Wood 2023). In this sense, a mommy tracker is a woman who has traded her career ambitions for flexibility, choosing motherhood over advancement (Pemberton 2001).

The care penalty

Unpaid carers provide invaluable services to society, but they encounter financial penalties in doing so because they leave their jobs or reduce their working hours to provide care. This penalty falls disproportionately on women since, in 87% of cases, women provide the majority of unpaid care in the household (Thompson, Jitendra, and Woodruff 2023). The care penalty is any type of penalty that reduces women’s opportunities and wages because they have care duties either with children or family members with disabilities, physical and mental illnesses, or end-of-life care.

The career break penalty

This penalty describes the way in which women who decide to take a career break for different reasons, primarily caring for others, an illness, and even taking a sabbatical, struggle to get the same job or a higher position when they get back on track; sometimes, they even suffer salary losses, receiving lower wages than before their break. Normally, they step out of their roles mid-career, and during the time they are on break, they are forgotten by the organization. When they want to return to a job, they are labeled as risky candidates because they left and because they lack recent work experience. Women fear that their skills are out of date, especially in terms of technology (Jacobs 2017). Most women will end up in junior positions and are told they are overqualified for the positions at hand.

The negotiation penalty

It has been suggested in a variety of studies that women do not always negotiate what they want in the workplace, such as pursuing high-paying careers or seeking out leadership positions (O’Connell Rodriguez 2023). Asking for a pay increase seems to be difficult, and it is not well perceived when women negotiate on their own behalf, which can also result in a social penalty due to potential backlashes in the workplace.

The ambition penalty

This penalty is based on what has been called the “ambition gap,” which states that women are less ambitious and less interested in their careers than men; but in reality, it occurs when women openly declare their intentions of reaching the top and are branded as *careerists* (Sánchez Sánchez 2023). Men are complimented for being ambitious, and women get criticized for being *difficult* and for appearing *power-hungry* (Paquette 2016).

Still, women enter the workforce with the same level of ambition as men, but men are rewarded for this while women get penalized for following their ambitions (O’Connell Rodriguez 2023; Sánchez Sánchez 2023). When a woman is considered ambitious, she becomes less hireable and her likeability decreases according to this gendered stereotype; and when women make a mistake, they are judged more harshly than their male counterparts (O’Connell Rodriguez 2023). Women are frequently called bossy or abrasive and are asked to watch their tone. Inequality starts long before a woman reaches a high-level position, right at the selection process, and once in the job, this penalty makes it more difficult for them to win the respect of their coworkers and subordinates (Sánchez Sánchez 2023). Furthermore, ambitious women face both financial and relationship consequences when they ask for more (Paquette 2016).

The likeability penalty

Women in the workforce face likeability problems based on their leadership style as well as how they collaborate with others and care about team members. In this sense, the Clayman Institute for Gender Research (2015) from Stanford University discussed a top female executive of *The New York Times* as being laid off due to the likeability penalty, explaining that the more competent a woman is, the less likable she is judged to be and that the more likable a woman is, the less competent she is perceived to be. This penalty is based on the idea that men and women are ranked differently in terms of likeability and that women are penalized when they behave in ways that do not fit gender stereotypes (Cooper 2013).

The loyalty penalty

A study developed at Duke University shows that employee loyalty can lead to exhaustion and unpaid work, which primarily impacts women because women are more likely to stay in a job out of loyalty to their teams even though they are not completely satisfied or do not feel challenged. They please and care for others but do not prioritize their own careers. They choose to develop strong relationships over their career advancement. They become more worried about strengthening the workplace culture and developing strong connections because of a sense of protection towards their teams (Hocking 2023). The sad side of loyalty is that the very skills that are expected of women, such as nurturing support and putting others first, are sometimes the very things that end up holding them back (Hocking 2023).

The class penalty or class ceiling

The class ceiling reflects a double pay penalty for working class women in elite occupations who end up earning less than women from upper middle-class backgrounds. Essentially, it means that class affects who gets to the top (Friedman and Laurison 2020). This penalty includes classist, racist, and sexist practices that benefit the already privileged (Hanley 2019). Women face penalties for how they dress, how they present themselves, and even due to their

accents. Upward-mobile women are perceived as pretentious and pushy (Friedman and Laurison 2020).

Fit penalty

This penalty is based on performance expectations in traditionally male jobs or jobs that require specific traits that women are not considered to have. The main problem is that women holding certain male roles effectively does not fit the attributes that are believed to characterize women; and this apparent lack of fit leads to expectations of failure and predispositions of negativity, which results in viewing women as ill-equipped to perform a job (Heilman 2001).

The obesity penalty

This penalty is based on stigma discrimination in the job market and shows reluctance to employ female candidates living with obesity. A study developed in 2016 in the UK suggests that women living with obesity experience a 9% wage penalty if they get hired (Bevan 2023). Huge importance is placed on women's physical appearance in the workplace under the premise that thinner is better (Pagán and Dávila 1997).

The age penalty (ageism)

With age, the pay gap increases, and gender inequality prevails among older female workers in most countries (Tyrowicz, van der Velde, and van Staveren 2017). In many cases, women have been forced out of their jobs due to age discrimination from the age of 40 and have been marginalized and pressured to adhere to gendered youthful beauty standards. Additionally, older women are more likely to be rejected from jobs and face higher unemployment rates (Zimmerman 2020). Some considerations have been made to the fact that older women are vulnerable to certain conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis, autoimmune diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and other health issues that might affect work.

Remote and hybrid work penalty or the proximity bias

The proximity bias is also called flexibility stigma. Since numerous women opted for remote and hybrid working arrangements to deal with family and care commitments, they have faced proximity bias more than men. This type of bias is the tendency to give preferential treatment to in-office employees, meaning that those who are close to the managers or supervisors are treated more favorably and have more opportunities for advancement than employees working remotely (Tsipursky 2022). Bosses give preferential treatment to in-person workers whom they can see (Morrone 2023). Women are judged unfairly because of the belief that they might not be working as expected because of care duties at home.

The pension penalty

Taking time off to raise children and care for a family member or working part-time to take care of family duties leads to pension savings shortfalls. Time spent supporting others prevents women from saving adequately for retirement and from developing an adequate financial planning horizon.

While women face multiple penalties, men obtain premiums and bonuses, such as the father bonus. While women face discrimination in the workplace when their identities as mothers and employees intersect, fathers are rewarded. Having children is good for a man's career, and

fathers are more likely to be hired than childless men. In addition, fathers tend to be paid more after having children (Cain Miller 2014). Becoming a parent has a significantly opposite impact on carers. Fathers normally enjoy an income bonus, and mothers suffer the penalty of earning less. This is due to the fact that fathers are considered more stable and committed when they have a family to provide for, and fathers are the most desired employees, while the opposite happens for mothers who are believed to be more distracted when they have childcare duties which can be incompatible with certain jobs (Cain Miller 2014). Women have to take time out of the workforce to care for children while men progress up the career ladder.

V. Most important female employee syndromes

Three major syndromes female employees face in the workplace have been identified. Two of them are related to working conditions that women suffer due to gender bias, and the third, to a position that women take towards other women in the workplace.

The imposter syndrome

A 2020 study by KPMG suggested that 75% of female executives across industries have experienced impostor syndrome in their careers (Knopp and Newinsky 2023). It includes feelings of self-doubt because they were not expecting to reach the level of success that they achieved, or they are afraid that they will not be able to live up to the expectations of those around them. Corporate culture exacerbates the problem of imposter syndrome, particularly for women (Nance-Nash 2020), and the more success they have, the lonelier they feel (Knopp and Newinsky 2023). This syndrome happens when women are not able to see other women similar to them and in the same position.

The tall poppy syndrome

The tall poppy syndrome (Billan 2023) is similar in certain ways to the ambition penalty, although the main emphasis is placed on women's achievements and successes. The term was developed by Dr. Rumeet Billan and is supported by extensive research with thousands of women through a study called "The Tallest Poppy" by the Canadian organization Women of Influence. This syndrome is an analogy to flowers that grow higher than others and are cut down in size so that they end up being the same height as the flowers around them. The study revealed that nearly 90% of women are penalized and undermined because of their achievements at work and are asked to play it down by their bosses. Women end up being silenced, attacked, resented, disliked, bullied, belittled, criticized, left out of meetings, ignored, dismissed, having others take credit for their work, being subjected to everyday microaggressions, and eventually cut down because of their success. This situation has a devastating effect on their overall well-being, mental health, and productivity.

The queen bee syndrome

This syndrome explains that high-ranking women intimidate and exclude other women, as they prefer to stay away from their female subordinates to suppress their feelings of inadequacy and exclusion exposed to them by male employers, or as a response to feeling of threatened in their working environment (Baykal, Soyalt, and Yeşil 2020). Hostile and discriminatory attitudes towards other women weaken bonds with the group and result in little or no identification and

distancing. Women focusing exclusively on their careers create a negative working atmosphere and negative work outcomes such as increased turnover (Baykal, Soyalp, and Yeşil 2020).

What the future holds

Since 2009, it has been suggested that turmoil and increased participation of women in the economy could significantly enhance global growth (ILO 2009) because women have been able to forge new pathways, even during the pandemic by creating home-based businesses (Garun and Rovella 2021). After the pandemic, in 2023, many women started getting back to work. Women returned to the workforce at a slower pace but at a higher rate than men.

In 2023, an increase in women returning to the workplace was visible, propelling the economy. Women gained more jobs after the pandemic than men, leading the way out of the recession. It is especially those with very young children, considered to be at their prime age (between 25 to 54 years old), who are the ones that emerged as the economy sector weapon (Lipman 2024).

Additionally, *Forbes* magazine pointed out that having more women in the workforce is good for business (Burns 2017), and when there is a higher proportion of women in competitive positions, leadership generates greater profits, is more socially responsible, increases security, and creates higher quality customer experiences.

VI. Conclusions

The list of problems that women face is extensive, and it is likely that, in the future, additional challenges will emerge. This is because women still face numerous discriminatory practices in the workplace that can take the form of barriers, penalties, and even syndromes; and women alone cannot help overcome structural barriers in labor markets. Numerous problems remain. Women are still far from parity and progress; many return or enter the workforce and stay employed, but sometimes in precarious and underpaid jobs.

Double, triple, and multiple biases and penalties can occur simultaneously, creating complex problems that are difficult to tackle. Within companies, employees need to be educated about unconscious biases. Presenting valuable information in the form of facts and statistics tends to work better because it reduces the subjective part of discussions. Appropriate policies to reduce discrimination and generate environments that promote gender equality at all levels are essential. Strategies that can deliver at least partial results include making salary levels transparent. With regard to job opportunities, flexible schedules make it easier for capable women who are carers to enter the labor market or to go back to work after a career break.

Different projects have been developed to reduce the penalties, especially for motherhood and care, such as what has been called the “returnship” (Jacobs 2017), which are paid working experiences in companies – women do real jobs – that can sometimes lead to permanent contracts, while they update their skills.

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