

# GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE ORGANISATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** *This article presents the theoretical framework and the results of a research conducted in a brewery with respect to the concept of gender discrimination. The main objective of the research is to identify gender inequalities and to describe organisational practices that reflect occupational segregation. The study shows that although there are equal opportunities on the labour market between women and men, there are differences in compensation and options for advancement at work, because women tend to give grater attention, time and effort to family and children than men.*

**Key words:** *stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, gender, gender inequality, gender discrimination, occupational segregation;*

## 1. Introduction

This article addresses the issue of gender inequality in organisations in Romania. In recent years, the representation of women on the labour market in our country has increased significantly due to the gender equality principles established by European policies and incorporated into Romanian legislation.

Major progress has been observed concerning gender equality in the workplace and differences in pay between women and men. However, the results are not as favourable as expected. Even though gender discrimination on the labour market has decreased significantly, gender equality has not been achieved, and gender balance in certain fields of work is far from being achieved (Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2004). The labour market is still divided into fields and professions dominated by either men or women. This situation is a major societal issue as it affects development, disadvantaging both genders. This topic has posed a research challenge because social norms reflect gender discrimination as a sensitive issue, even a taboo that is still not openly discussed in all life contexts. The objectives of this work have been to highlight the inequalities faced by women in a male-dominated field and to show the continuity of discriminatory social norms rooted in stereotype mentalities and ways of thinking.

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## 2. Defining Concepts

Social sciences extensively describe the concept of discrimination. Both social psychology and sociology have produced a vast body of literature seeking to reveal, through numerous studies, the mechanisms behind gender discrimination and to track its changes over time. Despite remarkable progress made on this issue, there are still many women who experience discrimination in both their personal and professional lives. The focus on women has not been arbitrary; gender-based discrimination has been a special issue in recent years, especially in the workplace.

Three terms are associated with this topic: stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

The term “stereotype” was first used by the famous American journalist Walter Lippmann (1922, 1998) in his book “Public Opinion”. The most cited definition is that “stereotypes are images found in our minds, serving as maps to guide us in the world”. Etymologically, it is composed of two Greek words: “stereos” (“rigid”) and “tupos” (“trace”).

Prejudices are “expressions of a social attitude or unfavourable beliefs, negative attitudes, or manifestations of hostile and discriminatory behaviour towards members of a group simply because they belong to that group” (Brown, 1995).

The term “discrimination” has a wide range of definitions. A universally accepted definition by most authors is that “it represents unequal and unfair treatment compared to that applied to other individuals or groups due to differences in gender, race, ethnicity, or age” (Gheondea et al., 2010, p. 115).

Stereotypes represent the cognitive component, prejudices represent the affective component, and discrimination represents the behavioural component (Chelcea et al., 2006).

According to the definition, there are several types of discrimination:

*Racial* discrimination is connected to unequal treatment based on skin colour (white, yellow, or black). For example, people of black skin colour have been considered inferior to whites and put to work as slaves from ancient times.

*Ethnic* discrimination refers to the lower positioning of a minority group. In our country, the Roma ethnic group is associated with various discriminatory content (e.g., that they steal, dislike hygiene, or do not attend school).

*Age* discrimination represents differential treatment based on the stage of life one is in. For example, young people are seen as lacking manners, while the elderly are perceived as grumpy. In job interviews, recruiters sometimes claim that recent graduates are too young and lack experience.

*Social class* discrimination argues that there are discrepancies between the rich and the poor. The wealthy are viewed as arrogant or thieves, while the poor are considered lazy, and so on.

*Origin* discrimination relates to the area people come from, whether rural or urban. Those from rural areas are seen as less refined or educated— “peasants”. Those from urban areas consider themselves superior to those from rural areas.

In the field of social psychology, there are other classifications related to discrimination (Chelcea et al., 2006).

I have tried to review the most important ones. Additionally, the concept of discrimination often carries a negative connotation, thus different groups are treated unfairly due to competition for resources. However, there is also positive discrimination, although less common, when a minority group receives benefits provided by the state (for example, the existence of special tuition-free places in universities for Roma people or for inhabitants of the Republic of Moldova).

In other words, discrimination is an unfair behaviour that puts prejudices and stereotypes into practice. It can be more subtle in informal areas, such as social exclusion, isolation, or avoiding contact.

Returning to the general concept of this work, which is gender discrimination, for a better understanding of the term “gender”, it involves roles, responsibilities, privileges, and constraints that are imposed or attributed to women or men based on culture and social contexts. Thus, in society, people have different expectations and attitudes depending on gender, which vary and change over time. We are aware that the gender equality ratio in the workplace is not yet perfect, and there is still much work to be done to achieve it.

Thus, we define gender discrimination in the workplace as the refusal to provide equal treatment due to a person's gender. This equal treatment refers to both the behaviour and language of others, as well as actions and decisions related to labour laws, such as salary, promotion, or hiring. Moreover, any breach of this treatment is punishable by law because gender discrimination is a breach of human rights. Gender equality is a right by which anyone is free to develop their own skills and express their opinions without being influenced by the characteristics of the gender to which they belong (Pantea, 2013, p.203-204).

Gender equality is a central objective for society because it leads to equality among citizens, which inevitably leads to sustainable development, both economically and psychologically (Tudose, 2005).

Inequality of opportunities between women and men is a widely discussed topic today. It consists of “unequal access to certain professions, differentiation in family obligations, or the degree of involvement in decision-making processes” (Grunberg, 2002).

Furthermore, gender equality supposes that both women and men are free to develop their personal skills and make choices without limitations imposed by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. Gender equality means that different behaviours, aspirations, and needs of women and men are equally considered, appreciated, and favoured. This does not mean that women and men should become the same (they are different in terms of muscular and neural structure), but that their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on the fact that they were born with a certain gender (UN-INSTRAW, 2011).

### **3. Gender Stereotypes**

Gender equality emerged with the feminist movement, which fights for women's right to vote, the liberalisation of abortion, their access to education, and increased job opportunities.

Gender roles are created from a young age: girls are dressed in pink, boys in blue. Girls play with certain toys such as dolls, while boys play with cars. The type of cartoons they watch also differs. From a young age, children are taught that there is a significant difference between men and women. Men have to be strong and not cry, while women are encouraged to be sensitive. These role prescriptions are acquired in primary socialization through family members and are sometimes perpetuated during secondary socialization. They are learned both through direct experience and through observing the behaviours of others significant for them, in an indirect manner (Kulik, 2000).

Femininity is associated with caring, empathy, and openness, while masculinity is associated with attributes such as action, control, initiative, and competitiveness (Stavila, 2015).

Gender stereotypes appear in mass media: TV shows, movies, music videos, and games. These images become deeply rooted in the collective mindset. Gender stereotypes place women in people-oriented occupations, while men are directed toward competitive, action-oriented roles.

Consequently, men are characterised as more agile than women, taking on leadership and control, while women are characterised as more sensitive and in tune with others.

Common fields where women are more frequently found include education, healthcare, and secretarial work.

Men are more commonly found in fields like construction, engineering, and upper-level management positions (Hentschel, Pens & Heilman, 2013).

Sociological research shows that women are underrepresented in highly competitive occupations that require high levels of physical skills but overrepresented in roles emphasising social contributions and requiring interpersonal skills (Mann, 2020)

If women do manage to attain leadership positions, contrary to stereotypes, they either do not have families or their private roles are taken on by another woman (nanny, grandmother).

Research indicates that female leaders must present themselves as confident, assertive, and competitive, but at the same time, they are seen as hostile, selfish, and cunning compared to their male counterparts.

Managerial positions are still predominantly occupied by men. Women often have to use more energy than men in building their careers due to numerous barriers resulting from dominant stereotypes in society or are part of the labour market that yields less adequate conditions (Mann, 2020).

In literature, the concept of a masculinised woman emerges when it comes to women in high-ranking positions. As responsibilities increase and pressure mounts, there is concern about losing femininity (Stănculescu, 2009).

Women express their emotions more frequently than men, except for anger and pride, which are seen as masculine emotions.

Most women have fewer chances to control their outward displays of emotions. Hence, the prejudice that they are less rational and objective and less capable of handling critical feedback. They are often gentle in their relationships with subordinates (Brescoll, 2016).

In Romania, women in leadership roles are underestimated, even though they are relatively numerous in the workforce compared to other European countries (Coman, 2004, p.102-103).

Women's opportunities, those with small children, for professional development are limited because, due to their children, they have less time to prepare, considering they have to carry out two jobs - being a mother and being an employee.

Stănculescu (2009) argues that another category of women has emerged today: businesswomen. Women who have succeeded and achieved success in top management positions can overcome their fears and possess all the characteristics necessary for a leader: decision-making, planning, conflict resolution, and strategic thinking.

Women dominate in fields such as healthcare, education, arts, and humanities, while men dominate in fields such as construction, engineering, and IT.

Although there has been progress in recent years (for example, the fact that we now see women as taxi drivers, bus drivers, or truck drivers), workplace discrimination often remains subtle. Women are afraid to resort to legal procedures for fear of losing their jobs.

#### **4. Forms of Discrimination**

Discrimination against women in the workplace continues to take various specific forms today, such as direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, victimisation, and harassment (Maliszewska-Nienartowicz, 2014).

In the case of indirect discrimination, it requires careful attention to reveal any unfair treatment by someone who discriminates. This involves focusing on gestures, words, behaviours, and actions committed by that person (Maliszewska-Nienartowicz, 2014).

Many times, women in the workforce are not even aware and do not realise immediately that they are being discriminated against in their own workplace. However, there are also scenarios where they become aware of the unequal treatment they receive but are too frightened to report it or to stand up against the aggressor.

Direct discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly or less favourably due to their gender compared to another person in the same situation. For example, if two women come for a job interview, one who wants to have a child and the other without children or any plans for children in the near future, the job will be given to the woman without children because she will have more time and will focus more on work.

An example of indirect discrimination is when an internal job opening for a leadership position is announced, but the announcement is received only by men, so that women do not find out about it and do not apply.

Another form of discrimination is harassment, which refers to "behaviour that derogates, debases, or humiliates an individual based on their sex" (Berdahl, 2007, p.644). For example, harassment can include sexual jokes, comments that women have no place in management, denigrating terms such as insults or swearing. There is also sexual harassment, which includes unwelcome and offensive expressions of romantic or sexual interest towards a recipient (e.g., unwanted touching, pressure for dates, or inappropriate sexual behaviour).

Victimisation is another form of gender discrimination, representing hostile treatment received by an individual for filing a complaint against another act of discrimination, often resulting in the individual's demotion or termination.

Many women do not have the courage to file complaints because it is difficult to provide clear evidence, and they can lose their jobs or end up not being heard.

Gender discrimination affects all aspects of a woman's life, leading to stress and poor health. Social isolation, exclusion, aggression, and stigmatisation are serious problems, both in professional and personal life, which can lead to various psychic disorders, such as: anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress (Hosang & Bhui, 2018).

## **5. Gender Discrimination on the Labour Market**

Gender discrimination on the labour market encompasses aspects related to sick leave, maternity leave (and now there is paternity leave too) and hiring discrimination.

Working mothers are seen as a burden by private employers because they have multiple responsibilities and cannot fully concentrate on work, which supposes extra stress (Mann, 2020).

There is a concept in literature known as the "glass ceiling", which explains that there are professions or jobs intended exclusively for men, where women cannot afford to reach a managerial position (Williams, 2000). These workplace inequalities indicate that it is more difficult for women to be promoted upward once they have been hired by a company, or once they have reached a certain level, they cannot be able to attain a higher management position (Macarie & Moldovan, 2012).

Occupational segregation occurs both horizontally (certain occupations or sectors of economic activity) and vertically (occupations or sectors that prioritise prestige, income, and job stability) (Grundey, 2011).

Employers often take financial costs (cost-benefit ratio) into account when recruiting. Since women are more likely to take maternity leaves or not work overtime due to family responsibilities, employers assess men as more productive. This implicit bias can lead to discrimination against women (Birkelund et al., 2021).

Wage disparities are another significant aspect of occupational segregation. A study at the European level shows that fields where women are predominantly found, such as education, administration, and sales, tend to be lower-paying. Only one-third of executives in European Union corporations are women (Guga and Sîndreştean, 2021).

Despite the fact that women have surpassed men in the academic environment in terms of the number of courses or educational qualifications, there is still a significant gender difference in high-power positions, such as in the corporate world, finance, politics and the judiciary (Guga and Sîndreştean, 2021)

A significant portion of this gap can be explained by the lack of female CEOs, presidents, female vice-presidents, and the fact that women do not hold high positions in large corporations (there are few female CEOs either in Europe or Romania). One explanation in literature is that women do not want to take on the risks and responsibilities associated with leadership roles, even though their skills and performance are equal to those of men (Rîlea-Stăvilă, 2008).

The World Economic Forum states in a report that “no country in the world has yet managed to eliminate the gender gap” (Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi, 2006, p. 22-23).

The labour market is still divided both vertically and horizontally by gender and discrimination. Despite tremendous progress in recent decades, women continue to struggle with discrimination in their everyday lives, being confronted with situations that disadvantage them.

## **6. Objectives and Methodology**

This article presents a research project conducted in collaboration with students from the seminars I teach on the topic of gender discrimination and inequality. It is a qualitative-descriptive research study conducted using semi-structured interviews with employees of the Heineken brewery. This company owns four breweries in our country: in Miercurea Ciuc, Craiova, Constanța, and Târgu Mureș, with its main objective being the production of both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beer.

We chose a company predominantly occupied by men to explore the barriers faced by the few women employed in the company, from both their perspective and that of the opposite gender. I believe that qualitative research is the most suitable approach for my topic as it allows us to touch on and emphasise certain sensitive points regarding the difficulties and issues faced by the participants in everyday life, an approach that cannot be completed by quantitative research.

The semi-structured interviews were held face to face between April and June, 2022. They were conducted until methodological saturation was reached. I attempted to conduct interviews with an equal number of women and men using the snowball method. I also tried to speak with as many people as possible from different departments and sub-departments to encompass various spheres within the company. I succeeded in communicating with individuals holding both managerial positions and operational roles to observe differences in thinking and behaviour. The interviewees age ranged between 24 and 58 years old. There were 5 women and 5 men, among whom 4 held managerial positions (two women and two men), and 6 held operational positions (three women and three men). The positions occupied included Technician Level I, Quality Specialist, Maintenance Engineer, Production Manager Specialist, female Laboratory Technician, Production Operator, Logistics Operator, and Forklift Operator.

The main aim of the research is to discover and analyse social norms and gender discrimination in the workplace. The study aims to propose solutions to address the impact of gender inequalities in promoting sustainable development within the company.

The research objectives are the following:

1. To discover how the issue of gender discrimination is defined among the employees.
2. To identify the gender inequalities and barriers faced by the participants within the company.
3. To identify the attitudes and stereotypical thinking of employees regarding gender discrimination.

4. To propose the best practices to mitigate the negative effects of gender discrimination.

## 7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this stage, in which the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained from the research takes place, I used open and theoretical coding to analyse and interpret the information included in the interviews. I mention some of the identified categories, such as: salary, promotion, and occupational segregation. I used pseudonyms in the research to reproduce the employees' statements.

Although much has changed in terms of addressing gender discrimination, the majority of interviewees confessed that discrepancies still exist. They acknowledged that there is still much work to be done before this phenomenon disappears completely, but the current situation within the company reflects a sense of security and respect between both sexes.

Regarding *salaries*, both men and women have similar expectations. The interviewees believed that there were no discrepancies in terms of remuneration. They explained that they receive what is stipulated in their individual employment contracts, and the basic salary is the same for everyone based on their job position, regardless of gender. Salary differences become apparent concerning overtime work – men work extra hours, while women do not, mentioning reasons such as childcare and household responsibilities.

Thus, differences in salaries emerge not because there is discrimination against women, as they do not deserve less money or are less qualified, but because men have more time to work overtime.

The same idea mentioned by theory results from research (Bayard, Hellerstein, Neumark & Trosck, 2003) regarding the double role that women must play: that of being both an employee and a mother, which does not allow them to work overtime. Women's lives are filled with various events, such as: celebrations, medical check-ups, and festivities that prevent them from achieving maximum productivity at work.

Concerning experience, *promotions within the company* are based on seniority, skills, and competencies. This aspect is closely related to the theory of human capital, which posits that an individual's work experience and education can lead to better leadership or a managerial position. Within the Heineken Company, Erika had a harder time accessing a managerial position and took a longer time due to multiple maternity leaves (three in total), spending 23 years in an operational role. In contrast, Frederico, after only a year as an assistant manager, quickly reached a managerial position as a Production Manager. Women prioritise family, while men prioritise their careers.

Regarding *occupational segregation*, it can be noted from the positions held by the interviewees that there are still gender preferences in certain fields due to societal stereotypes and prejudices. The persistent tendency for women and men to work in different spheres is a key source of gender inequalities that can lead to differences in terms of salary. Women tend to work in less physically demanding conditions, with lower workloads, and often focus on emotional intelligence and care (for example, in the field of education). In contrast, men are expected to work in technical fields, aspire to



top management positions, and inspire control and power.

This is also the case at Heineken, as seen in the example of Agnes, where there is a tendency in the HR department to hire only women. This can be related to an important mechanism in the theory of occupational segregation, where occupations with high concentrations of women tend to be devalued, resulting in lower wages for female employees. The employee named Agnes believes that if the field of biochemistry were dominated by men, salaries would be higher.

Regarding the *representation of gender discrimination in the workplace*, the participants consider it to encompass the breach of rights of one of the two parties (male or female) or unfair behaviour that denies equal treatment at work due to gender, through language, actions, breach of social norms, or human rights non-observance.

The most common discriminatory behaviours are observed during recruitment and selection processes. It is most difficult for women to be hired for so-called “male” positions, just as it is challenging for men to be hired for so-called “female” positions. Discriminatory actions are often indirect because stereotypes and biases in people's minds can cloud their judgment.

Interestingly, when it comes to recruitment, women tend to hire other women, while men tend to hire other men. In the case of this company, CVs of employees were separated by gender, and the male gender manager made the decision to hire only people of the same gender as him.

Conversely, a situation revealed in interviews is when the female head of the HR department wanted to hire another woman for the position of HR assistant, arguing that this field is predominantly occupied by women.

Questions such as “Are you married?” “Do you plan to have children in the future?” “Are you pregnant?” directed only at women are indicative of discrimination during job interviews.

Regarding the *presence of women in managerial positions*, it appears that they are more inclined to show greater empathy towards both their colleagues and employees. Women's communication style, which is gentle and focuses on indirect and paraverbal communication, is appreciated by men. However, the managerial position requires a more masculinised behaviour, in which firmness, toughness, correctness, and sincerity come first.

The situation is similar when answering the question, “How do you see the ideal candidate?” Both women and men use adjectives that, in the field (Brescol, 2016), are used to describe masculine behaviour. Therefore, stereotypes and biases still represent a barrier to the status of women in managerial positions. In the minds of those interviewed, there is still a perception that leadership or managerial positions should preferably be held by men, as they are considered more capable of leading and organising a company than women, who are often seen as lacking analytical thinking.

The result of these alignments between stereotypically masculine qualities and the qualities idealised for a leadership position is that masculine stereotypes portray men as naturally endowed with qualities specific to leadership status.

As for women, they perceive the path to a leadership position as different when it comes to gender. Female interviewees see the ideal female manager quite differently

compared to men, with a different leadership style and communication style. They believe they must work harder than men to stand out, even though they often have significantly better performance than their male counterparts. Some of the female interviewees admit to having a tendency to undervalue their contribution at work, considering themselves insufficiently prepared to take on a leadership role.

The qualities that a manager should have according to women fluctuate between those associated with both masculinity and femininity: emotional intelligence, empathy for employees' issues, but also emotional control in certain limit situations.

At the same time, the female interviewees consider that gender is not relevant when it comes to leading a company; rather, specific characteristics, such as: ambition, organisation, a sense of humour, calmness, caring, listening, and patience.

In recent years, even though there are many female managers, they often adopt some behaviours from men in order to be taken seriously and not be judged. Moreover, in the participants' conception, female managers should be strong, serious, and self-assured to avoid falling victim to criticism and prejudices.

Regarding *relationships between the female and male gender* specifically among employees, they seem to be very good, usually normal. All study participants emphasise that they have been helped by their colleagues when needed, that they have felt supported and respected. They all consider themselves fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know each other, and in some cases, collegial relationships have gradually turned into friendships.

## 8. Conclusions

The overall opinion is that society has modernised, and we are now living in a world where opportunities are equal between women and men, where attempts are made for gender equality policies and a non-discriminatory attitude. However, this work illustrates minor but complex issues that still exist related to gender discrimination in the workplace. It emphasises that socially constructed gender norms continue to form the basis of inequality between women and men, revealing an expected behaviour from both genders regarding their choices and capabilities. The main conclusions of the study are as follows:

1. There are no differences in compensation between women and men regarding the base salary and bonuses for the same position, whether it is an operational or managerial role. However, men tend to resort to overtime more often, while women, due to their dual role as mothers and employees, do not have the opportunity to work overtime, which explains the salary discrepancies at the end of the month.

2. Women are disadvantaged when it comes to career advancement within the company because maternity slows down their skill development. In the employer's perception, maternity leave is not interpreted as work experience, so women cannot keep up with men after such long periods of absence.

3. Employers still prefer to select male candidates for positions dominated by men, making it difficult for women to be hired in "masculinised" roles, contributing to occupational segregation. Moreover, male-dominated fields tend to be better paid,

while occupations with a high concentration of women tend to be devalued, with lower pay due to stereotypes and prejudices rooted in society.

4. Participants stated that although success is not related to one's gender, men are favoured when someone is to be selected for a higher position. For women to advance to top positions, it seems that they must adopt behaviours and qualities associated with men and prioritise work. The characteristics specific to a manager, according to the interviewees, correlate with the characteristics of men in literature, and characteristics specific to women are sometimes seen as advantages and sometimes as disadvantages (such as empathy, gentleness, and sensitivity).

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