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Gendered preferences: A matter of nature and nurture

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A Moral Perspective on Social Inequality

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Gendered preferences: A matter of nature *and* nurture

Sabine Roeser

Women are still disadvantaged in the workplace compared to men: they earn less for the same job and are less likely to achieve higher positions. Besides the gender bias that they face, women also contribute to gender inequality by making different career and family choices than men. What are the causes of these differences?

Difference feminism states that women are simply different from men and therefore want different things; these differences should be celebrated and re-valued. For example, caring for children and family members should be valued as much as a career outside the home. Liberal feminists agree that this may indeed help us overcome certain forms of inequality, but warn us that we should not too readily assume that women really want different things than men. Rather, our culture creates and perpetuates such strong expectations and role models, that our preferences, desires, and aspirations follow suit.

There is a lot of evidence that gender roles are to a large extent socially constructed. Ideas about what women and men are like, tend to vary a lot across space and time and thus cannot be defined without reference to the cultural and historical context. Also, women differ a lot from each other in what they want in life. Furthermore, many women have deviated from society's expectations which should remind us that there is not one definition of what it is to be a woman.

Gender differences result from nature *and* nurture. Striving for gender equality, however, does not mean that everyone has to be the same. Rather, it can mean that people are provided with the opportunity to develop in a way that suits them, independently of their sex or gender. This means that we should resist gendered expectations and make no assumptions about men's and women's career and family choices.

ware that it is happening, and because it can influence the behaviour of people who are genuinely trying to treat everyone equally. Implicit biases primarily influence assessments in ambiguous and complex situations in which people rely on their gut instinct as well as the general impression they have of the other person.

This has been identified in research on interviews in which a White job interviewer assesses a Black candidate. An interviewer who feels less at ease with a Black candidate tends unconsciously to exhibit less encouraging non-verbal behaviour. For example, the interviewer may make less eye contact or give the candidate less time to answer questions. This leads to a so-called *self-fulfilling prophecy* in which the candidate feels less at ease, affecting his or her self-presentation and thereby confirming the interviewer's negative expectations. Research has shown that these kinds of unconscious processes cause members of under-represented groups to under-perform in all sorts of school and work-related situations.

In the long term, exposure to stereotypical expectations and implicit prejudice can result in people becoming less motivated or adjusting their ambitions to the opportunities that they find (see Box 2.6). If girls hear often enough that engineering is for men, they will be less inclined to choose a technical profession. These more or less invisible processes contribute to the perpetuation of inequality by members of privileged groups as well as members of disadvantaged groups.

The paradox of equality

On the one hand, research clearly shows that equal abilities, efforts, and achievements can still lead to different outcomes as a result of the accumulation of small advantages or disadvantages generated by stereotypical expectations. On the other hand, many of our attempts to treat people equally are based on the assumption that we are capable of assessing individual merits and opportunities in an objective manner. In some cases, the conviction that this is possible can even make the situation worse. If organizations, for example, emphasize individual achievements and declare themselves to be open to diversity, managers are more inclined to believe that they are objective in their assessments. This, in turn, makes them less alert to the possibility that stereotypical expectations may be colouring their judgement, as a result of which employees actually suffer more from implicit biases. This is called the 'paradox of equality'.

All in all, there are enough indications that in order to eliminate inequality in the labour market, it is not enough simply to open up educational opportunities to disadvantaged groups. At every stage of a career, stereotypes and prejudice continue to affect the opportunities that an individual gets to demonstrate what they are capable of and the remuneration they receive for their achievements.

The selection and valuing of professions

There is a big difference in the value and remuneration attached to different professions, even for professions that require the same level of education. A job with government, for example, does not pay as much as a similar job in the corporate world. Ethnic minorities and women are over-represented in the service sector and the public sector, and more men can be found in technical positions and in the corporate world. This partly explains the difference in salaries between men and women, but individuals have less freedom to select a particular profession or sector than may at first seem to be the case. People select precisely those professions in which they expect to be successful and can get hired, because they fit the stereotype of their particular group.

Women more often choose a part-time job or make do with a job without significant career prospects because they are expected to take on the major responsibility for caring for the family. Jobs in which women are over-represented are systematically valued less and are less well paid than jobs that are dominated by men. This has little to do with the characteristics or the demands of the job. As the number of women entering a particular profession increases, there is a decline in the status and salary of that profession, a phenomenon known as 'Sullerot's law'. This is certainly the case in the health care sector, or in the Dutch judiciary.

A moral perspective

Opportunities in education and in the labour market are thus not only determined by one's own merits. Society requires the same achievements from people facing different circumstances, and the choices that people are given are limited by the fact that they belong to a certain group. This is partly the result of unconscious processes that are perpetuated by both privileged and disadvantaged groups. What are the implications of this if we want to reduce inequality?

It is not enough for us simply to realize that different groups attain differing levels of success in education and work. For one thing, people tend to rationalize inequality. We like to believe that the world around us is fair and we therefore close our eyes to injustice (see also Box 4.2). Second, the way in which implicit bias works is often unconscious and unintentional. The effects of implicit prejudice therefore cannot be eradicated by simply deciding that everyone deserves to be treated equally. Third, it is particularly painful for us to face our own shortcomings when we fail to behave according to the moral values that we hold dear – such as fair treatment for all (see also Boxes 1.3 and 1.5). It is easier to focus on what appears to be fair at the individual level rather than what is unfair at the group level (see also Box 3.2).

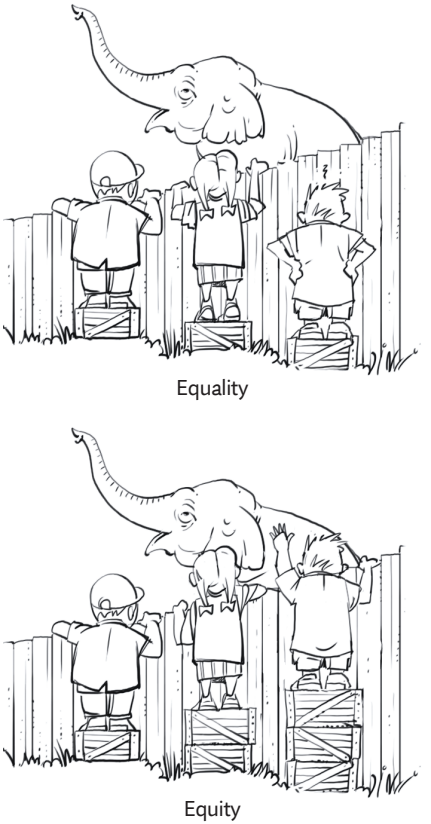
Equality versus equity

Even when it is clear that *something* must be done, this does not indicate *what* should be done or who should do it. Should the government impose rules or should we leave it to employers? Should the solution be anonymous job applications or policies targeting certain groups?

In order to answer these questions, we need to make a distinction between equality and equity. The difference between these two concepts lies in the focus on the *starting position* in which people find themselves (see Figure 4). If we treat everyone in the same manner, we ignore the unequal starting position of different groups and the unequal obstacles that stand in their way. This means that they do not in fact enjoy equal opportunities, as shown in the upper side of Figure 4. Unequal treatment is therefore sometimes necessary in order to offer people equivalent opportunities, as shown in the lower side of Figure 4. This is the idea behind proactive measures such as affirmative action policies that target particular groups. To decide what is needed in order to be able to offer everyone equal opportunities, we must first map out the visible and less visible obstacles that exist, and pinpoint who is encountering these obstacles.

Figure 4

Equality vs. equity



What can you do?

If certain conditions were met, equal opportunities in education and the labour market would be achievable. First, we must recognize that access to education is *not sufficient* to reduce inequality in the labour market. Second, we need to ask ourselves whether the 'choices' that people make reflect their own wishes or are the result of *stereotypical expectations*. And third, we must focus on the *causes* of unequal opportunities instead of tackling their consequences. If people were given a more equal starting position at the beginning of their career, they would be better able to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. Then there would be less need for retrospective compensatory measures, which many people consider to be unfair. Investing in the development of children in their early years offers the best prospect of preventing the cycle of deprivation from being passed from generation to generation (see also Box 2.4).

If we were thereby able to increase the success of minority groups in the labour market, this would also eventually reduce the explicit and implicit prejudice against these groups. In the short term, this requires clear choices, a willingness to invest in the future, and careful communication. Affirmative action policies will be viewed as unfair preferential treatment as long as it remains unclear what kinds of obstacles these target groups face. Citing instrumental arguments such as the 'business case for diversity' as the

most important motivation behind such policies is a risky approach. This suggests that there is a gain to be made in the short term. Increasing diversity is a question of patience and perseverance, however, and may initially involve significant costs. We may expect more support for a diversity policy that is motivated by moral arguments. People are often willing to do what is right in a broader social, historical, and moral context, even if they do not benefit from it directly. Current debates about inequality in education and work tend to emphasize individual choices and responsibilities, even when group memberships limit their opportunities to be successful in their education or professional career. To create truly equal opportunities, it is important to take into account moral concerns that would argue for group-level solutions.