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RESEARCH PAPER

Analyzing "Queen Bee Syndrome" in the Context of Women's Leadership and Managerial Roles through Empirical Research

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Introduction

In recent years, the issue of gender equality and female empowerment has gained significant attention in various spheres of society. While progress has been made to bridge the gender gap, certain barriers still hinder women's advancement in the workplace. One such phenomenon is known as the "Queen Bee Syndrome," which refers to the occurrence of senior women in positions of authority undermining and impeding the progress of other women within the same professional setting. The Queen Bee Syndrome was first coined in the 1970s by researchers at the University of Michigan. It describes a phenomenon in which successful women in leadership positions display negative or hostile behavior towards their female subordinates, creating a hostile work environment. These Queen Bees often view other women as competitors, leading them to undermine, criticize, or even obstruct their advancement opportunities (Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky, 1992). Research on the Queen Bee Syndrome has been limited, and the available studies have mostly relied on quantitative methods, such as surveys or experiments. However, to truly understand the complex nature of this phenomenon, a qualitative approach is needed that allows for in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of women in leadership positions and the women they interact with (Netshitangani, 2019).

Therefore, this study aims to explore the Queen Bee Syndrome from a qualitative perspective, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups to collect rich data on the experiences and perceptions of women who have either experienced or witnessed this phenomenon in the workplace. The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the Queen Bee Syndrome and its implications for women in the workplace, and may inform the development of interventions and policies to address this phenomenon and promote gender equity

Literature Review

According to Jayarante, Tavris, and Staines (1973), the Queen Bee Syndrome refers to a phenomenon where women in positions of power display negative behaviors towards their female subordinates due to gender-based prejudice. This theory is supported by various academic studies. Another definition of the syndrome describes a successful woman who intentionally withholds knowledge and support from other women to hinder their success. Such behavior includes being unsupportive, critical, and limiting opportunities for career advancement. A study by Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers (2016) suggests that the Queen Bee Syndrome may contribute to higher levels of stress among female employees working under female bosses. Additionally, the concept of Queen Bee Syndrome has been used to describe successful women who refuse to mentor or support other women in their professional growth.

These studies have explored the prevalence and effects of the Queen Bee Syndrome that women in leadership positions who exhibit Queen Bee behaviors may experience increased levels of stress, burnout, and lower job satisfaction. These studies also suggests that such behavior contributes to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Women who perceive their female colleagues as threatening are more likely to engage in Queen Bee behaviors. Additionally, women who experience Queen Bee behavior from their superiors may show less commitment to their jobs and a decreased likelihood of pursuing leadership positions in the future. (Larrieta-Rubín de Celis et al., 2014).

In a classic study from sixteen years ago, female university professors displayed Queen Bee behavior in their evaluations of female graduate students. (Die, Debbs Jr., and Walker Jr., 1990).The professors perceived female students as less committed to their careers compared to their male counterparts, whereas male professors did not observe such differences. Findings of recent research supports these findings, showing that senior-level female professors still perceive their female graduate students as less committed than male students. However, this phenomenon stems from a coping mechanism for the gender discrimination these women have faced, rather than catty or mean behavior. Evidence suggests that women who have experienced bias may apply gender stereotypes they encountered in their own careers and emphasize their differences from other women. Researchers recommend addressing this issue at the organizational level to eliminate this phenomenon (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Rudman, 2010; Ellemers et al., 2020).

The study conducted by Stoker, Van der Velde, Lammers, and Jordan (2019) provides valuable insights into the relationship between the prevalence of the Queen Bee Syndrome and the representation of women in leadership positions. Their findings indicate that workplaces with a higher number of women in senior roles tend to have a lower occurrence of the Queen Bee Syndrome. The authors suggest that the presence of women in leadership positions can contribute to the creation of a more supportive and inclusive work environment for women at all levels of the organization. When women see other women in positions of authority, it can serve as a source of inspiration, motivation, and encouragement. Women in leadership positions can become role models and mentors, offering guidance and support to their female colleagues. They may also be more likely to advocate for gender equity and challenge any discriminatory or biased practices within the organization.

Moreover, an increased representation of women in leadership can help dismantle the stereotypes and biases associated with women in the workplace. It challenges the notion that women are inherently less competent or qualified for leadership roles and reinforces the idea that women can excel in positions of authority. By creating a supportive environment where women are uplifted and empowered, workplaces with more women in leadership positions can mitigate the negative effects of the Queen Bee Syndrome. Women may feel less pressure to adopt Queen Bee behavior as a means of assimilation or survival, as they can find camaraderie, mentorship, and solidarity among their female leaders.

However, it is important to note that the study's findings do not suggest that the Queen Bee Syndrome disappears entirely in organizations with more women in leadership positions. The presence of the syndrome can still be influenced by various factors, including individual attitudes, organizational culture, and the specific dynamics within a workplace. Additionally, the study's findings may vary depending on the context and culture of different organizations. To further promote a supportive environment and reduce the prevalence of the Queen Bee Syndrome, organizations should continue to focus on increasing the representation of women in leadership roles. This can be achieved through targeted recruitment and development programs, providing opportunities for women to gain the necessary skills and experiences for advancement. Additionally, organizations should strive to create a culture that values collaboration, mentorship, and inclusivity, regardless of gender.

Despite some progress, the Queen Bee Syndrome remains a significant issue in many workplaces. Larrieta-Rubín de Celis et al., (2014) revealed that women who had experienced the Queen Bee Syndrome were more likely to have negative job attitudes and lower job satisfaction compared to those who had not encountered such behavior. The Queen Bee Syndrome continues to be a relevant and significant issue in workplace culture, particularly for women aspiring to reach senior leadership positions. Strategies such as increasing the representation of women in leadership roles and promoting supportive workplace cultures could help mitigate this phenomenon.

To combat the Queen Bee Syndrome and create more inclusive and supportive workplace cultures, organizations should consider implementing strategies that address the underlying causes of this phenomenon. Increasing the representation of women in leadership roles is one effective strategy. When more women hold positions of authority, it not only challenges the notion that women are incompatible with leadership but also provides support, mentorship, and opportunities for advancement to women at lower levels of the organization. This can help create a more inclusive environment where women feel empowered to pursue their career goals and aspirations.

Promoting a supportive workplace culture is another crucial step in mitigating the Queen Bee Syndrome. Organizations should foster an environment that values collaboration, teamwork, and mutual support among all employees, regardless of gender. Encouraging mentorship programs, establishing networks for women, and promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity can contribute to reducing the prevalence of Queen Bee behavior. Furthermore, organizations should actively address gender biases and discrimination through diversity and inclusion initiatives, unconscious bias training, and fair evaluation processes.

However, it is crucial to note that the Queen Bee Syndrome does not arise solely from individual attitudes or characteristics; it is deeply rooted in the systemic challenges that women face. By addressing the underlying issues of gender bias and discrimination, organizations can work towards reducing the prevalence of Queen Bee behavior and fostering an inclusive and equitable workplace. Given that, the Queen Bee Syndrome often emerges as a response to the systemic barriers women face in the workplace, including gender bias and discrimination. Addressing these underlying issues is essential for reducing the prevalence of Queen Bee behavior and promoting gender equity in leadership positions. By implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, fostering a supportive work culture, ensuring fair promotion processes, and demonstrating leadership commitment, organizations can create an environment where women can thrive and contribute to their full potential.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in the qualitative study exploring the Queen Bee Syndrome is the Power and status theory. This theory suggests that individuals are motivated by power and status and that these factors can affect their behavior towards others. In the context of the Queen Bee Syndrome, the theory suggests that female leaders may experience feelings of threat or insecurity when they perceive other women as potential competitors for power and status. This perception can lead to behaviors associated with the Queen Bee Syndrome, such as undermining or discrediting other women's work, creating hostile or unsupportive environments, or actively impeding their career advancement. By exerting control or dominance over other women, these leaders may seek to maintain their perceived power and status.

Material and Methods

To address the research questions, the research methodology employed for this study adhered to a qualitative approach. The selection of qualitative research was deliberate, as it proved most suitable for examining the multifaceted phenomena. This approach enables researchers the ability to collect comprehensive data directly from study participants, facilitating a profound understanding of the subject matter. In this study, qualitative methods, including one-on-one interviews and focus groups, were employed to gather essential data from participants. These techniques provided participants with the platform to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and insights pertaining to the "Queen Bee Syndrome" within university settings and its impact on their career advancement.

Population and Sample Selection

The sample was selected from eight public sector universities. The decision to focus on eight public sector universities stemmed from their consistent systems for promotion, selection, seniority, salary structures, and basic pay scales (BPS), particularly in comparison to the private sector. Additionally, public sector universities in Pakistan are significant contributors to education. These selected universities were strategically located in four cities: Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Gujrat, and Lahore, chosen for their convenience in accessing respondents and organizations.

These universities represented a diverse mix, including both old and new establishments, coeducational and women-only institutions, situated in both urban and smaller cities, with or without specific area specializations. The purpose behind this selection was to comprehensively explore various viewpoints and provide an extensive analysis of potential factors influencing the career progression of women.

Study Participants

The study encompassed a total of 48 female participants. Among them, 30 were senior women occupying positions in university management, encompassing Deans, Directors, Heads of Departments, Registrars, Treasurers, and other management unit representatives, all falling within cadre/basic pay scale (BPS) 18 or above. The remaining 18 participants were younger women in positions corresponding to cadre/BPS 17, such as Assistant Controllers, Assistant Registrars, Assistant Treasurers, and Assistant Directors, sharing similar demographic characteristics with the senior women.

Data Collection

The qualitative study on the Queen Bee Syndrome utilized a diverse range of data collection methods. These included In-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The interviews and focus group discussion were conducted using different mediums such as face-to-face, phone, and video individual calls as well conference calls for focus group, based on participants' preferences, accommodating geographical distances and

increasing participant diversity. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data, allowing for flexibility in questioning while ensuring consistent coverage of key topics.

During the interviews, audio or video recording was used to capture the conversations accurately, supplemented by detailed notes for thorough analysis. This approach aimed to ensure that no details were missed during data collection. By employing this methodology, aimed to obtain comprehensive and rich data, providing deep insights into the Queen Bee Syndrome's impact on women in the workplace. The combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and varied interview mediums enabled a robust exploration of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives.

Data Analysis

In the qualitative study on the Queen Bee Syndrome, the data collected through semi-structured interviews and the focus group underwent a thorough process of data analysis. The chosen method for analysis was thematic analysis, which involves systematically identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data to derive meaningful insights.

The process involved transcribing and organizing the interview and focus group data. This ensured that all the information gathered from the participants was readily accessible for analysis. Researchers then embarked on a process of familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading it multiple times. This iterative process allowed them to become immersed in the participants' narratives and gain a comprehensive understanding of the content.

Results and Discussion

Based on the collected data, and after conducting thematic analysis the following main themes emerged. These themes highlighted the complex dynamics and challenges faced by women in the workplace, particularly regarding their interactions with female bosses:

Journeying Through Scholarship Challenges: Women's Struggles in Pursuing Overseas Education

A significant portion of the participants shared their encounters with career challenges while working under the female bosses. Despite earning scholarships and advancing in their careers, the journey was far from smooth, marked by numerous obstacles. Participants revealed that obtaining funding from their own women only Universities, for pursuing higher education abroad was a daunting task. One of the participants expressed:

"I' would like to share my personal experience. One of the most daunting challenges I ever faced was securing the release of my scholarship for my overseas studies. I was the first woman to receive this prestigious award. However, the process to access the funds was terrible. I had to navigate through a labyrinth of red tape, bureaucratic delays, and endless hurdles created by my women Boss. It took so long that at one point, I feared I wouldn't succeed. I had to exert tremendous effort. I believe there are many other women who have faced similar issues in their careers. The challenges I encountered could fill a book... I'm grateful, [Bushra], that you're addressing this issue on our behalf." (A Key Informant)

Another participant recounted similar hardships. Despite being granted a foreign scholarship for her higher education, she experienced prolonged delays in administrative processes and the handling of required documents, leaving her physically and mentally drained:

"My university, led by a female competent Authority, intentionally delayed matters and withheld the crucial documents needed for my immigration when departing for a foreign country. I had no choice but to postpone my flight... Fortunately, my father held significant influence, and without his assistance, navigating through this intricate process would have been nearly impossible... One can only imagine the challenges faced by those lacking such support." (Senior Interviewee, 23)

Women who employ unsupportive tactics may perpetuate stereotypes and biases against women in leadership positions. If female leaders are seen as unsupportive of their female colleagues, it can reinforce the stereotype that women don't support each other professionally. This can have long-lasting consequences for the perception of women in leadership roles, making it even more challenging for other women to break into these positions.

Absence of Presumed Assistance

The majority of participants conveyed their frustration when discussing unsupportive female bosses. They believed that women should collaborate and assist each other in attaining senior management positions, but, regrettably, these bosses often acted in contradiction to this idea. Instead, they displayed ruthless and uncooperative behavior towards other women, actively working to hinder their career progress. As a result, many women found working under female bosses to be a source of frustration.

"I have had an extremely challenging experience [...]. Supportive women have been few and far between. Many of them seem possessive and reluctant to see other women succeed in their roles. [...] I recognize that time may be limited, and I could talk for hours about how a female boss created numerous obstacles to hinder my career advancement. Unfortunately, I am not alone in this experience [...]. It's a prevalent issue, and I have frequently heard other women express similar grievances about senior female executives playing a detrimental role and placing roadblocks in their career paths. It's disheartening." (Senior Interviewee, 22)

This absence of guidance can be a significant roadblock for aspiring female professionals who could benefit greatly from the experiences and knowledge of their more senior counterparts. One way this hindrance can manifest is through a lack of mentorship and guidance. Successful women who have overcome various obstacles in their careers might choose not to mentor or support other women, withholding valuable insights, advice, and opportunities

Lack of Consideration for Work-Family Issues

From the data, a theme that emerges is the lack of consideration for work-family issues exhibited by certain women bosses. It suggests that some women in positions of authority may demonstrate a lack of sympathy and understanding towards the work-family challenges faced by their female subordinates. Balancing work and family responsibilities can be particularly challenging for women, as they often face societal expectations and gender norms that place a greater burden on them in terms of caregiving and household responsibilities. When female bosses fail to empathize or understand these challenges, it can create a difficult work environment for their female subordinates.

Following data also revealed that some women bosses were not considerate in relation to women's work-family issues. They refused to be sympathetic in times of need despite there being a need to support women in the universities. On the contrary, women felt that there were difficulties working under female bosses. They found them hostile and non-cooperative:

"I was living in a joint family system. I never had any difficulty with childcare [...]. Once my mother in law was not well. My little son was at home. Our maidservant could not come that day. I got a phone call from my husband about the situation. I went to my female boss and asked

*her for a short leave. She turned my application down and replied ruthlessly, "this is not my headache, and you women folk always provide lame excuses to get back home before time […](*Junior Interviewee, 41)

The absence of comprehension and empathy from female supervisors can give rise to feelings of frustration and discontentment among female subordinates. Such a situation can impede their capacity to effectively juggle their professional and family obligations and might even have repercussions on their career advancement.

Comparative Analysis of Male and Female Bosses in Work-Family Dynamics

From the data, a further theme emerged as expressed by the participants. They perceive male heads as being less fussy and more considerate, particularly in relation to work-family issues. The participants believe male bosses are more understanding and accommodating when it comes to the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities. It is possible that participants had positive experiences with male boss who have demonstrated empathy and flexibility in addressing work-family issues. This have led to a perception that male bosses are generally more understanding in this regard. The above participant added that:

"If there was a male boss, instead, I don't think he would have shown this kind of behavior. I am sure he would let me leave earlier […]. Truly speaking I don't want to work under women heads, they are more finicky and less considerate. However keep this in account that this is not true in all cases of male bosses and not this is the matter of male dominancy" (Junior Interviewee, 41).

Traditional gender roles often place the primary responsibility of caregiving and managing household affairs on women. Consequently, participants may perceive male bosses as having lower expectations or being more lenient towards work-family challenges, as they may not experience the same societal pressures related to caregiving and household responsibilities.

However, the participant made this clear that it is important to note that this perception about the male bosses does not reflect an inherent superiority of male heads. Instead, it reveals a perception among the participants that male bosses may be more considerate and accommodating regarding work-family issues. Though this perception cannot be generalized.

Limited Mentorship and Support

Mentorship is crucial for professional development, as it provides guidance, support, and valuable insights to help individuals navigate their careers. For women, having a senior female mentor can be especially beneficial, as they can offer unique perspectives and share experiences related to gender-specific challenges in the workplace.

However, when Queen Bees withhold mentorship, it denies junior participants the opportunity to receive guidance and support that could significantly impact their professional growth. This can leave them feeling adrift, unsure of how to navigate their careers effectively.

"I lack a mentor and the guidance necessary for advancing in my career. Despite having a female boss who possesses extensive experience and education, she refrains from sharing her success stories with our team. She does not offer motivation or encourage us to strive for progress. She does not actively seek out opportunities for career growth and appears disengaged from our professional concerns" Junior Interviewee, 31)

Without access to mentorship, junior participants may struggle to develop necessary skills, expand their networks, and gain visibility within the organization. They may also face challenges in understanding the unwritten rules and expectations" of the workplace, which could hinder their advancement.   Moreover, the absence of senior female mentors can reinforce a sense of isolation and disempowerment among junior women. It may perpetuate the belief that there is a lack of support and solidarity among women in the workplace, further undermining their confidence and motivation.

Not All Women in Positions of Authority Exhibit "Queen Bee Behavior"

Some of the participants asserted that it is crucial to acknowledge that not all women in positions of authority exhibit Queen Bee behavior. In fact, many women in leadership roles actively support and empower other women in the workplace. These women are being acknowledged as positive role models, mentors, and advocates for gender equality. These supportive leaders understand the importance of fostering an inclusive work culture that values collaboration, mentorship, and support among all employees, regardless of gender. They recognize the benefits of diversity and actively work towards breaking down barriers and promoting opportunities for women to thrive. As per the joint statement released by the focus group, it was evident that there were women in positions of authority who actively provided support to their junior female officers, colleagues and friends:

"We categorically and firmly state that the majority of female bosses are exceptionally supportive, compassionate, and considerate. They serve as role models for other women, offering guidance, encouragement, and actively seeking opportunities for our career growth. We hold them in the highest regard, and our deep respect and admiration go out to them" [...]" (Focus group).

When women leaders empower and support their female colleagues, it creates a positive ripple effect throughout the organization. It encourages collaboration, teamwork, and the sharing of knowledge and expertise. It also cultivates an environment where women feel valued, encouraged, and motivated to reach their full potential.

Conclusion

This empirical investigation has brought to light several crucial facets of women's experiences in the workplace, particularly within the context of the "Queen Bee Syndrome." Key revelations include the lack of support from female bosses, the neglect of work-family issues, disparities in the approaches of male and female bosses regarding work-family dynamics, the limited availability of mentorship and support for women, and the distressing occurrence of intra-gender harassment. It is essential to underscore that not all women in positions of authority exhibit Queen Bee behavior, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and supporting those who do not. The negative behavior from women executives has contributed to a toxic work environment, resulting in reduced job satisfaction, lower job retention rates, diminished self-confidence, increased stress, and heightened tension. This behavior also serves as a negative role model for women's empowerment and dampens the aspirations of women employees. The consequences of these outcomes hold significant implications for both organizations striving to promote gender equality and individuals seeking to foster inclusive work environments.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, several proactive measures can be recommended to enhance women's workplace experiences. Organizations should invest in leadership training programs that prioritize providing support and mentorship to female employees, irrespective of gender. Employers should prioritize work-life balance by formulating policies that account for the unique challenges faced by women. Furthermore, cultivating inclusive work environments is crucial to deterring intra-gender harassment and fostering respectful

interactions among employees. Addressing the Queen Bee Syndrome and improving women's workplace experiences necessitates a comprehensive approach involving leadership development, policy reform, and the cultivation of an inclusive culture. By implementing these recommendations, organizations can contribute to a more equitable and supportive workplace for everyone.

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