

The Causes, Manifestations, and Effects of Benevolent Sexism and How It Contributes to the Perpetuation of Gender Discrimination

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Abstract: Benevolent sexism is a subtle form of gender discrimination that manifests itself in seemingly friendly attitudes and behaviors towards women. This research synthesizes existing literature, incorporating research and analysis from multiple subjects including psychology, sociology, and gender studies to explore various forms of benevolent sexism, dissect the underlying ideologies that support its existence, and investigate its impact on women in society. In addition, this paper includes case studies of real-life situations to illustrate the practical implications of benevolent sexism. According to analysis, it can be concluded that benevolent sexism manifests itself in various ways, such as an expression of kindness and appreciation, traditional gender roles and stereotypes, denial of women's capabilities due to deep-rooted prejudices, and paternalistic and chivalrous behavior. From the perspectives of historical foundation, a lack of awareness, and social environment, benevolent sexism exists and contributes to the perpetuation of gender discrimination by reinforcing the stereotype about women, hindering women's advancement in professional and academic fields, gradually normalizing gender inequality within societies and communities, and lacking recognition of women's achievements, contributions, and abilities.

Keywords: Benevolent Sexism, Gender Equality, Gender Roles, Stereotypes

1. Introduction

Gender equality has long been a central issue in the pursuit of social justice and human rights. Over the years, considerable progress has been made in improving overt forms of gender discrimination. However, beneath the surface of overt discrimination lies a more subtle, often unrecognized, but equally impactful form of gender discrimination: Benevolent Sexism. On the surface, this may seem well-intentioned, but multiple studies have shown that benevolent sexism reinforces traditional gender roles, limits women's rights, diminishes women's autonomy and opportunities, and perpetuates gender inequality. This research paper progressively analyzes the origins of benevolent sexism, its consequences, and why it contributes to the perpetuation of gender discrimination when it appears to be well-intentioned. To be specific, Section 2 introduces different types and manifestations of benevolent sexism; Section 3 explores the reasons for the existence of benevolent sexism; Section 4 summarizes a variety of ways in which benevolent sexism perpetuates gender discrimination.

Benevolent sexism is a huge barrier to the progress of gender equality, therefore, the research on benevolent sexism is important to the ongoing efforts to achieve gender equality.

2. Types and Manifestations of Benevolent Sexism

There are several ways that benevolent sexism manifests itself, including an expression of praise, gendered expectations, denial of women's capabilities, paternalistic behavior, and chivalrous behavior [1]. This section analyzes these different types and manifestations of benevolent sexism.

2.1. Praise with Benevolent Sexism

Praise is often seen as an expression of kindness and appreciation, but it can also be a vehicle for expressions of benevolent sexism. This involves offering to reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate stereotypes. For example, when a woman receives praise such as "You're doing so well that a man can't even compete with you as a female", what appears to be praise on the surface carries underlying assumptions about women's abilities and limitations. Such praise implies that women's success is an exception, and it is not what a woman should achieve.

2.2. Gendered Expectations

In today's society, specific social responsibilities are often assigned on the basis of gender. These responsibilities and expectations often revolve around traditional roles and stereotypes. For example, society often assigns men leadership roles and there is a stereotype that men should be responsible for earning money to support the family, while women are only expected to take on family responsibilities, in other words, taking care of the family is women's biggest task [2]. Gender expectations lead to an unequal distribution of family and caregiving responsibilities. Even though women have their own full-time jobs, they are still expected to take on the role of a homemaker. There are even cases where women are blocked from promotion in the workplace on the basis that they are expected to take better care of their families.

2.3. Paternalistic Behavior

A common manifestation of paternalistic behavior is making decisions for women without their consent based on the assumption that women lack the ability to make decisions independently, whether in the workplace or in society [3]. For example, when assigning tasks, leaders automatically assign women to less challenging and less physically demanding tasks because of the stereotype that women are weak and incapable of accomplishing difficult tasks. Paternalistic behavior reinforces the notion that "they are inherently incompetent or weak", thus resulting in the ability of women to make decisions on their own being undermined [4].

2.4. Dismissing Women's Competence

Benevolent sexism undervalues or denies women's capabilities based on deep-rooted prejudices. It limits women's opportunities to play a full part in society and ultimately perpetuates gender inequality. For example, women are discouraged from pursuing careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields [5]. This is due to the traditional stereotype that compared to women, men are better suited for the sciences, while women are better suited for the liberal arts. Women also hear statements like, "She's a girl, so she's weaker in math and science," when they are students. The truth is that quite a few of the brilliant people in STEM fields are women.

2.5. Chivalrous Behavior

Chivalrous behavior is often seen as a demonstration of male politeness, respect, and kindness toward women. While these gestures may seem kind, they can also be a developing tool for gender discrimination. Not only does it reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations, but it also sends the message that women are a vulnerable group that needs specific protection and help. A common example of this is when men are tacitly assumed to be expected to take the initiative to pay for the meal at the end of the meal. In many Michelin restaurants, a menu without any prices is offered specifically to women. This suggests that a woman may not know from the beginning how much the meal will cost, while a man receives a menu with detailed prices, including value-added tax (VAT) and service charges. The menu without prices is called the "ladies menu". This may seem to be a consideration for women, but it is, in fact, a tacit acknowledgement that women are not able to pay for their meals or are less able than men to pay for their meals.

3. Reasons for the Existence of Benevolent Sexism

3.1. Historical Factors

An important factor in the existence of benevolent sexism, which has been developing for centuries, is its deep-rooted historical foundation. In the early feminist movement, some men advocated for women's rights while believing that women needed to be protected from social victimization. This contradictory value highlights the deep-rooted nature of benevolent sexism. It is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they seek freedom from gender stereotypes and demand the right to education, employment, and suffrage. On the other hand, advocacy for women's rights clashes with the perception of some who believe that women need protection [6].

3.2. A Lack of Awareness

An important factor contributing to the persistence of benevolent sexism is the general lack of awareness of its existence and its harmful effects. Benevolent sexism is often subtle, making it difficult for individuals to recognize and confront it. From a young age, individuals are socialized into traditional gender roles and expectations, which may include benevolent sexism beliefs. Benevolent sexism is unintentionally inflicted on many people. They sincerely believe they are respectful and caring to women, unaware of the underlying biases and stereotypes that drive their behavior [7].

3.3. Social Environment

The social environment plays a key role in perpetuating benevolent sexism. In a society where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, benevolent sexism may be more prevalent and seen as a norm. Friends, families, and schools in society can have a significant impact on an individual's beliefs and behaviors. If a person lives in an environment that holds benevolent sexist beliefs, they are faced with pressure from their peers to adopt and conform to these values. In today's society, media, movies, television, advertising, and literature are often accompanied by benevolent sexist values. All of these factors reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations and shape social perceptions of benevolent sexism.

4. Different Ways in Which Benevolent Sexism Perpetuates Gender Discrimination

4.1. Stereotype Reinforcement

Benevolent sexism reinforces the stereotype that women are primarily responsible for housework, they are dependent on men for protection, and they are discouraged from pursuing careers in fields such as STEM. Benevolent sexism plays an important role in reinforcing and perpetuating traditional gender stereotypes, which can have a profoundly damaging impact on women. Efforts to advance gender equality should include addressing and breaking down stereotypes that are perpetuated by benevolent gender discrimination in all aspects of life.

4.2. Career and Educational Opportunities

Benevolent sexism reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations that may hinder women's advancement in professional and academic fields. This type of discrimination often suggests that women are better suited to certain types of careers, such as nursing or parenting. Benevolent sexism may also create barriers to education for women. Teachers who hold beliefs of benevolent sexism may inadvertently discourage female students from pursuing challenging academic subjects or underestimate their abilities, potentially limiting their educational achievement. Such stereotypes perpetuate and limit women's choices and educational opportunities.

4.3. Normalization of Gender Inequality

One of the consequences of benevolent sexism is that it gradually normalizes gender inequality within societies and communities. Because benevolent sexism often appears benign and complementary, it is difficult to recognize it as a form of gender discrimination. This invisibility allows it to persist and continue to reinforce gender inequality. At the same time, the intergenerational transmission of benevolent sexism can lead to the perpetuation of gender inequality [5]. Children who grow up in environments where benevolent sexism is normalized are likely to hold such attitudes and beliefs with conviction.

4.4. A Lack of Recognition

Benevolent sexism can lead to a significant lack of recognition of women's achievements, contributions, and abilities. While benevolent sexism manifests itself in seemingly positive praise, women's achievements are often overshadowed or minimized. Such discrimination can also lead to the mistaken belief that women's achievements are largely attributable to their gender rather than their efforts and talents. Even when women excel in a particular field, their abilities and capabilities may be underestimated or ignored.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, benevolent sexism perpetuates gender inequality. This subtle but pervasive phenomenon reinforces traditional gender roles and expectations and ultimately hinders women's advancement in all aspects of life, including career, education, and personal growth. It is clear that benevolent sexism and its seemingly well-intentioned gestures and praises contribute to the system of gender inequality. Future research should prioritize a diverse sample of participants to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences related to benevolent sexism. In this paper, cross-sectional analyses are also incorporated to better understand how benevolent sexism intersects with other forms of discrimination. In the future, longitudinal studies and experimental designs can also be used to gain insights into how benevolent sexism evolves over time and its long-term effects on

individuals and society. By addressing these gaps and pursuing new research directions, more inclusive and effective strategies can be developed for gender equality.

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