

The Experiences of Female Leaders in Male-Dominated Industries

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Abstract

Historically women rarely occupied management positions. An increase in educational attainment, access to birth control and the reduction of structural barriers built on gender norms has improved women's accessibility to leadership positions. While women make up 51.5% of all management/professional positions, this is not reflected in male-dominated industries. For example, according to 2017 Catalyst data, women hold only 4.4% of CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, and only 1 in 5 congress positions.¹ Stereotypical traits associated with men and women differ based on the socialization of gender roles that impact people's perceptions of what makes a successful leader. For example, men are stereotypically viewed as dominant and independent while women are viewed as supportive team builders.^{3 4} This study explores the experiences of females in male dominated industries through analyzing their struggles and barriers faced when advancing into leadership roles. The researcher will conduct interviews with ten females in ten different industries while utilizing literature on socialization's role in the perceptions and expectations that limit female leaders. Using the feminist standpoint theory, the researcher will utilize the experiences of women in male dominated industries to greater understand the impacts of ingrained socialization and women's advancement into leadership positions.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Introduction of Gender Norms and Roles

Socially structured gender norms are what children grow up to see as socially acceptable behaviors, actions and dispositions based on their gender.³ Elementary schools are havens for the early construction of culturally accepted gender relations between boys and girls.³ While young boys and girls may separate from each other due to differing social interests and activities, children do not maintain separate gendered interactions unless they are conditioned to traditional gender norms.³ The introduction of toys with stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics are often made by teachers, families, and friends who may or may not understand the implications behind their seemingly harmless attempt to provide entertainment.³ Early studies regarding gender roles claim that boys embody an active persona while girls assume a passive persona.³ These studies are viewed as traditional and outdated due to women and men having greater similarities in the workforce as opposed to differences. The construction of gender norms not only impact the interests and interactions among children, but they also influence the perceived roles and values each child will adopt as they mature into adults.³

Research on gender reveals three broad theories behind gender roles and norms: biological, cultural/social, and segregation based factors. The biological theory emphasizes factors such as the maturational process of the body and anything inherited genetically.⁴ One's sex is referring to being born male or female. Gender is how an individual identifies, a controversial grey area depending on various social and cultural influences the individual is exposed to.⁴

The social and cultural theory relates to the introduction of various cultural and generational values that are often introduced to males and females as they interact with society.⁴ Sociologists claim that gender roles are a result of the socially accepted cognitive and social frameworks that dictated male and female interactions and dispositions over many generations.⁶ The cognitive and social framework introduced to males at a young age constructs the mentality to exemplify power and status, traits that are expected in order to lead effectively.⁶ In contrast, the cognitive framework traditionally introduced to women emphasized what is socially accepted as passive and supportive qualities that impact female succession to leadership positions.^{3 4} For example, females who are consensus builders are viewed as less competent leaders.⁴ On the other end of the spectrum, males who build consensus are applauded for their team work, where females who are dominate in their work environment are disliked due to breaking socially accepted norms of males and females possessing inherently different leadership styles.⁴

1.2 Gender vs. Sex

Gender was originally studied and discussed to emphasize the social and relational nature of what makes women different from men.⁸ Scientists and researchers alike concluded that sex relates to nature, and gender relates to nurture. The sex component signifies the differences between male and female bodies, serving as natural “binary” categories.⁸ Gender is social factor that relates to behavior and interactions within society. The use of an individual’s physical sex to assign gender norms has been controversial throughout the past four decades.⁸ By categorizing and assigning gender roles based on biologically being male or female, the social system that is meant to foster society’s interactions has created social barriers and gender discrimination.⁸ Segregation of gender is a proponent of gendered institutions, institutions where practices, images, ideologies, and distributions of power are used to sector society’s social realm.⁹ From a historic lens, politics, the state, the academy, religion, and the economy have always been dominated, developed, and interpreted by men.^{8 9} Due to the aggregate of institutions being controlled by men, the absence of women became ingrained practice.⁸ Historically, the institutions where women were welcomed and encouraged were that of the households. Institutional hierarchy not only reinforces occupational segregation, but it reinforces instilled socialization that builds barriers to entry for women advancing in the workforce.⁷

1.3 Traditional Masculine/Feminine Roles & Occupations

“Masculine and Feminine Occupations”, an article published in 1904 in *The North American Review*, serves as a key example of what was traditionally accepted as “female capabilities”, as well as providing a female perspective of early 20th century women working in industrial fields. Author Marion Foster Washburne claimed that “women are unable to endure long relentless hours of work required of industrial routines”¹⁰. She emphasized the need for sofas in women’s restrooms as a place for all of the “pale and exhausted” women to relax and collect themselves.¹⁰ When ‘exhausted and tiresome’ ceased to be an adequate depiction of female capabilities, Washburne placed greater emphasis on women being too fragile and weak to work outside secretarial office positions, roles traditionally associated with women.¹⁰ Washburne assumed traditional gender roles, roles defined in relation to men- proving the reality of socialization and its impact on perceived gender capabilities.

The categorization of women in the early 20th century spanned from married, married with children, unmarried, unmarried with children, widowed, and widowed with children.¹⁰ Women’s roles were defined only in relation to men. Each classification had expectations to be upheld by each and every woman. For example, unmarried women were “strongly advised” to find work in order to support themselves and avoid social shaming.¹⁰ Women were allowed and encouraged to occupy industrial fields, but when the increase of women in the work place spiked considerably, women were said to be “crowding out” men in their own industries.¹⁰ Such claims in turn gave greater support behind the gender pay gap, where women enduring the same labor as men, often working longer hours, were paid considerably less for their work efforts.¹⁰ For example, a male teacher in 1903 made \$45.25 a month while a female teacher on average made \$38.14.¹⁰ Washburne claimed that women were more than willing to work for less than men, and as long as they maintained a spirited attitude they would remain employed.¹⁰

1.4 Perceptions of Leadership Traits

Sociologists over the course of many decades have assessed the leadership traits of men and women, noting few differences in their efficiency and levels of productivity.⁹ Claims of substantial differences in leadership styles between men and women are results of the perceived lack of ability for women to assume hierachal positions based on the stereotypical nature that is expected from women in the at home and in the workplace.^{3 9 10} Key stereotypical

differences in leadership between men and women are that women are said to be more democratic and participative while men are top-down and domineering.¹¹ Women are expected to place greater emphasis on interpersonal skills while men place emphasis on being maximally assertive in every situation.¹¹ Men are also described as being “greater intellectual risk takers”, while women are “coping” and trying to be more efficient.¹¹ Research suggests that society struggles with the perceptual barriers presented through gender stereotypes and occupational segregation.⁹ There are very small differences between male and female emotional intelligence, grounding that men and women are more alike than different.⁹ Stereotypical assumptions and expectations of gender, ingrained through socialization, impact individual views of what traits define a successful leader. Stereotypical gender expectations and perceptions do not match the reality of male and female leaders in the workforce. Society is influenced by socially accepted stereotypes and expectations of men and women that effect objective reasoning and decision making. For example, women are expected to be kind consensus builders in the workplace whereas men are expected to be domineering. If a woman was to assume what society would consider a “masculine” leadership style, she would likely receive negative feedback and would be seen as unlikable.¹⁰ The unconscious double bind is a common barrier for women advancing in the workforce. Studies show that the leadership styles between men and women are virtually indistinguishable⁸. The only factors that separate men and women in the workforce are the repeated actions based off stereotypical traits that characterize men as competent leaders, and women as unfit for advancement.⁸

Anne Cummings, a former management professor at Wharton, spent five years holding conferences for female business executives surrounding gender perceptions of leadership in the workforce. Cummings began her sessions by asking female executives to list traits they associate with male and female leaders. Respondents listed multi-taskers, emotional, empathetic, intuitive, relationship building, verbal, consensus building, and gossip to describe females, and strong, intelligent, ego-driven, assertive, competitive, stubborn, self-righteous and direct to describe males. Recent findings suggest that men and women are more alike than different in regard to leadership and emotional intelligence.¹² With a greater understanding that men and women are more alike than different in regard to leadership traits and emotional intelligence, the masculine and feminine boxes that separate and socialize men and women contrastingly will be challenged.

1.5 The Rise of Female Leaders

With women rising to occupy a greater number of management and leadership positions, society’s focus narrows on the choices made by them.^{8 10} The scrutiny that follows the introduction of women into positions concentrated by men has not only increased “weariness” on behalf of men, but has also created a stigmatized barrier that women in male dominated industries face each and every day.¹² Women in leadership positions have encountered structural and social barriers that reinforce the stereotypes of females being negatively associated with successful leadership. Structural barriers are the institutions that were built by men, for men. While women may possess titles such as CEO, President or Executive, such titles will not protect them from being talked over in a meeting or being told to “stick to tradition”.⁹ The introduction of women into positions of power challenges the power arrangements that society has become accustomed to. Female leaders in male dominated industries threaten male privilege and status in fields that were not traditionally available to women.¹²

Traditionally, traits deemed necessary to be a successful leader in a male dominated industry are: confident, “to the point”, and competitive.⁴ These traits are not often connected to the leadership styles of females, therefore reemphasizing gendered stereotypes and the perception of women lacking the ambition and confidence to be successful.⁹ While traits such as nurturing, supportive and modesty are often assigned to females in the workplace, women in leadership positions may or may not choose to embrace them⁹. For example, Phyllis Wright, author of “Women and Leadership Styles”, described her experience occupying a leadership position as President of the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society. Wright emphasized the pressure she felt to dominate the room when holding board meetings. She admitted that assuming a domineering presence was outside her typical leadership style, but she desired maximal attention and respect.¹⁷ On the contrary to her hopes, her domineering presence was seen as intense and ineffective in the eyes of both men and women. Wright’s experience is a prime example of unconscious gender bias that women face when taking on masculine roles. Women who are too compliant and empathetic are seen as passive and incompetent, whereas if they are dominant and attention seeking, they are considered too aggressive and are disliked by both men and women. Madeline Heilman, a psychology professor at NYU conducts studies to greater explore gendered stereotypes and bias. Her most influential study included asking volunteers to evaluate managers entering a new company where the participants were told genders prior to beginning the evaluation. If the managers being evaluated were presented as demanding and “to the point”, results show that participants only evaluated negatively if the manager was a female. Heilman claims that the double bind arises in situations such as her experiment

due to society trying to align gendered stereotypes placed on men and women with the stereotype of what makes a successful leader and how that stereotype reflects male attributes.¹³ Due to female advancement in managerial positions being a relatively recent shift, the capabilities and traits of women are compared to that of men, and are judged accordingly.^{11 12}

1.6 Gender Performativity

Judith Butler, author of “Gender Trouble” argues that the categories of gender, sex, and self-identity are not truly expressive of nature and our bodies. Instead she suggests that they are the results of socially governed performances.⁵ Butler claims that not only is the ‘self’ subject to social and political discourses, but the body is constituted in a similar fashion.⁵ Whatever sense of facticity we have about our bodies is a matter of cemented practices and performances that are made on behalf of societal contingencies.¹⁵ Butler’s theory of gender performativity is driven by “how can we break apart the naturalized conceptions of gender and sex?”⁵ The proposed answer to this question rests on whether sets of roles deemed feminine or masculine are repeated and re-experienced. Gender performances are not said to be mechanical practices, but are instead governed by rules.¹⁵ Individual reactions and decisions to gender roles are up for interpretation based on the norms that have already been provided.¹⁵

The strategy consistent with Butler’s argument entails that there needs to be movement toward appropriating and redeploying the categories of identity themselves, not only to challenge stereotypical gender roles, but to also include the convergence of varied discourses that could take place.⁵ Butler’s theories on gender performativity strive to empower greater fluidity in human identities. The reconfiguration and greater understanding of gender that could establish a more intelligible society that will in turn make bigger steps toward socially diverse and accepting institutions throughout society.⁵

2. Theoretical Framework

Feminist standpoint theory challenges traditional and subjective patriarchal norms that ignore the experiences, contributions and capabilities of women.⁷ Feminist standpoint theory is shaped by the understanding that knowledge is produced based on multiple standpoints as opposed to just one.⁷ Because women were historically the caregivers of society and men were the valued contributors, the knowledge socially accepted throughout society is based upon the patriarchal standpoint⁷. This paper utilizes the standpoint theory to explore the experiences of women in leadership positions and industries that are male-dominated.

3. Methodology

To better understand the barriers experienced by women in male-dominated industries, ten female leaders in ten different industries are interviewed to gather female perspectives from various fields in the workforce. Interviews are conducted with eight set questions for each participant- allowing time for story-telling to increase participant comfort as well as permitting interview dialogue to be less robotic. After interviews are conducted, participant responses are analyzed in order to interpret and gather significant thematic findings. Participants will be referred to by the industry they represent in order to maintain anonymity. The research sample consists of participants who are all residents of North Carolina. The ten participants live and work in Western North Carolina. The ten industries, company age, total number of employees under direct report, position title, generation, and age of children are located in table 3.1. Reoccurring themes between the women interviewed will be used to provide greater understanding of female leadership and experiences in male-dominated industries.

3.1 Sample Description

Table 1- Demographic Characteristics

Industry	Age of Business	Number of Total Employees	Position Title	Participant Generation	Ages of Children
Automotive	8	35	Executive Manager	Generation X	None
Athletics	90	60	Director of Athletics	Baby Boomer	None
Banking	109	6	Corporate Secretary	Generation X	8
Higher Education	40	500	Director	Baby Boomer	None
Construction	13	45	Co-Founder/Co-Owner	Generation X	23, 21
Consulting & Design	5	5	President/Lead Consultant	Generation X	23, 26
Corrections	80+	400+	Program Coordinator	Baby Boomer	None
Finance	36 years	100	Regional Director	Baby Boomer	29, 26, 24, 21
Healthcare	50+	1000+	Chief of Staff	Baby Boomer	30, 26, 21
Insurance	100	6	President	Millennial	12 months

3.2 Thematic Findings

3.2.1 competency

Perceived lack of competency on behalf of women was a reoccurring theme throughout each of the ten interviews. Competency was referenced in two different contexts including the inability to assume an authoritative position and the inability to overcome emotions.

The literature grounds societal perceptions of women as too emotional to be competent and effective in positions of authority. Because institutions have been historically run by men, the absence of women in male dominated industries and leadership positions has become ingrained practice.⁷ The double bind represents the major dilemma that many females experience.¹² Women in male dominated environments are seen as unfit for management positions if they are too hesitant, too accommodating, or too emotional.⁴⁹¹⁶ On the contrary, women are also seen as unfit if they possess traits such as control, confidence, and dominance.¹⁷ In contrast to women, if men adopt nurturing and supportive roles within their company, they are not impacted negatively as women are—they instead are seen as progressive leaders.¹² A 2014 Pew Research study shows that when male executives speak their mind, their competency ratings raise by 10%, whereas when female executives speak their mind, their competency ratings drop 14%.¹⁸ Women in male dominated industries are respected until they violate the stereotyped norms, roles, and traits that are meant to guide societal interactions.¹⁷

Perceived lack of competency was found to be a reoccurring theme within the banking industry. While the participant now holds an esteemed position within the industry, the ride to the top was not smooth sailing.

Literature grounds ‘busy work’ as a stereotypical monotonous task assigned to women regardless of the industry. Organizing, scheduling, and completing mundane tasks are what women are perceived as better at than men due to the instilled cognitive frameworks that situate women as organized homebodies.⁶ “Women take care; men take

charge.”¹ The woman representing the banking industry described coming of age in an environment with only two female employees. Claiming that the manager required new employees to complete routine busy work as stepping stones toward advancement, the banking participant came to the realization that the monotonous job that she held for four years led to no opportunities for advancement. The job the banking participant was advancing toward had been filled two times by white men of around the same age range. Based off the Pew Research study discussed above, women have to work harder and longer prove themselves in society.¹⁸ While women may possess the same qualifications and desirable traits as men, women on average are rated as less competent due to perceived inefficiencies regarding their strength as leaders.¹⁸

3.2.2 motherhood

Motherhood is viewed as a career inhibitor for women in male-dominated industries and beyond. The “nuclear family”, known also as the “traditional family”, labels females as mothers and homemakers and fathers as head of household.¹⁹ Due to traditional expectations of women assuming motherly and familial responsibilities, opportunities of advancement for women are often overshadowed by perceptions of females lacking leadership capabilities¹⁹. Though studies show that women are choosing to have children later in life, societal assumptions that women will choose to occupy household and motherhood responsibilities remains a significant inhibitor to female advancement in male dominated industries.²⁰

The woman representing the automotive industry discussed the ever-changing economy and challenges that rise when motherhood enters the career scope. The participant claimed that female leaders, especially in male-dominated industries, need to understand that they can be replaced. The participant herself does not have children, but was able to explain the impact of motherhood on career advancement through the experiences of someone else. She described the choice to leave the workforce as an easy decision for this person, explaining that this person did not anticipate the possibility that their career may never be the same again. The interviewee emphasized the frustration this person experienced when after just a year of being out of the workforce, their position ceased to exist. The woman representing the automotive industry claimed that women must adjust their career expectations if they plan on being mothers.

A 2013 Pew Center research team conducted a survey that asked American men and women whether they felt being a mother or father negatively impacted their ability to advance their career. The results showed that 51% of women claim they feel their career is suffering due to motherhood, where only 16% of men reported a negative impact on their career advancements.²⁵ Major percentage gaps show not only the small percentage of men who take paternity leave, but also that women in particular are missing opportunities for promotion and advancement due to maternal wall bias. Maternal wall bias refers to the stereotypes and various form of discrimination that mothers experience when looking for employment or seeking advancement in their place of work.²¹ Perceived hyper-femininity is associated with motherhood in situations where employers and/or employees expect mothers to be overly sensitive and emotional.²¹ Expecting mothers to be overly emotional builds barriers that block opportunities for advancement in leadership^{21 23}. Due to society being built “by men for men”, the emotional and sensitive traits that are placed on mothers do not correlate with the ideal masculine methods of leading within an institution or organization.²⁵

Another example of motherhood as an obstacle for leadership advancement is being of ‘prime child bearing age’. The woman representing the insurance industry described an opportunity presented after being named president of an insurance company. The insurance participant was offered a chance to interview with a board of directors who fund and oversee various insurance firm functions. The participant described the interview taking place in a large conference room with a group of older white men. The interview was brief and the insurance woman was told that they would select a candidate within the week. Two days later the participant received word that she did not get the position on the board and learned that the interview took place in order for the board to appear diversified. The participant discussed how the board has always comprised of white males 55+, and their decision to recruit another white male was less than shocking. The participant was later informed that her age played a significant factor in the board’s decision to hire an older man. Studies show that companies are less likely to hire young women, especially pregnant women, in comparison to men.¹² Neoclassical theorists such as Gary Becker situate women as having the greatest utility inside the home as opposed to the labor force.¹⁹ Hiring practices that discriminate based off age and “expected” pregnancies are direct products of how socialization has belittled women in the workforce.¹⁷

3.2.3 devaluing femininity

Femininity is negatively associated with leadership based on the perceived disadvantages that females hold in comparison to men. Due to female characteristics and capabilities being defined in relation to men, all that encompasses femininity, whether it be motherhood or personal demeanor, are viewed as unfit for advancement in leadership roles.²² Femininity relates to one's choice to assume roles and traits that epitomize womanhood without feeling the pressure to act in gendered boxes.²²

The woman representing college advancement discussed her experiences while 'coming of age' in the industry of higher education. As a baby boomer beginning her adult career in 1986, the majority of her colleagues and supervisors were male. While women were increasing their presence in academia, higher education would be highly concentrated by males until the turn of the 21st century. Experiencing very few instances of gender based discrimination throughout her early career, the participant described the shock experienced when her much younger and less experienced male colleagues doubted her abilities as a leader in higher education. The higher education participant explained that being "too kind" was an unexpected criticism. "In order to be a team player and work with students—you must be kind and attentive". To be kind is a trait stereotypically associated with women, a trait that has been grounded as a 'less productive' way to communicate and delegate tasks in a leadership position⁹. While the participant in question was surprised that "being too nice" was considered an ineffective leadership trait, the responsibility to be helpful and kind to students was priority despite claims of being unfit for leadership in college advancement. The college advancement participant described kindness as key component influencing her femininity, part of who she is as a woman. The participant's capabilities as an influential figure in higher education were being questioned based on socially constructed assumptions that devalue femininity's role in leadership. An authoritative approach to student enrichment is what the participant was told was most effective in being a leader in academia. The shared experiences illustrate discrimination based on the choice to assume a leadership style outside the authoritative realm.

The woman representing the healthcare industry provided interesting insight into the generational differences that surround femininity. The healthcare participant described the hardships her great grandmother faced as a nurse in the early 1920's. Though nurses were respected and valued inside the hospital, their voices outside the hospital were meaningless. The healthcare participant discussed her mother's experience in contrast to her great grandmother's hardships in that her mother's voice was heard, but was belittled in places of male concentration. The interviewee's mother called herself a "pusher", referring to the steps that women in the traditionalist and baby boomer generations took to ensure female visibility and equity in the workforce. Studies shows that there are major differences in how gender discrimination is viewed and addressed among the generations that occupy modern day society.¹⁰ Women who are a part of the baby boomer generation are much more aware of gender discrimination due to coming of age in society when females were less prevalent in the workforce, let alone leadership positions.⁹ On the other hand, studies show that though Millennial women value work place diversity, they see gender discrimination as an increasingly less common factor impacting women and their career advancement.¹⁸ Though a reduction in structural barriers has allowed women to increase their presence in the workforce, gender discrimination still reigns significant through factors such as the gender wage gap.^{17 18}

3.2.4 other observations

Observations beyond the listed themes include sexism among women and the stark number of male mentors in contrast to female mentors.

The participants in the construction and banking industry claimed there to be quite a bit of friction between women in authority positions. Competitiveness, a trait stereotypically associated with male leaders, was reported as common between females racing to the top. One participant discussed the ridicule that women receive from other women if seen fraternizing with men in higher positions or hanging around the bar at organizational functions. Studies show that female competitiveness is a combination of self-promotion and a derogation of rivals.^{23 27} Studies also show that females are often more judgmental of their female coworkers due to the need to "level the playing field" as well as a way to reach the top.²⁷ Due to the small percentage of females occupying leadership positions in comparison to males, behavioral psychologists claim that females will sabotage and inhibit each other from career advancement if it creates an inherent advantage in their own career.²⁷

Each of the ten participants noted a male as their key mentor. Literature on mentorship proposes that male mentors in male dominated industries could arguably be the best source of mentorship for women due to their connections and experience in a field that has posed minimal obstacles for their advancement.²⁸ On the opposite end of the spectrum,

females may be more drawn to male mentors because of their own unconscious gender bias against women.²⁷ Sociologists claim that no matter how informed women feel they are regarding gender bias, a majority of women in the workplace will still rate men as more competent than females.^{13 15} Studies show that 90% of the people comprising the workforce have masculine unconscious beliefs about what is the most effective way to be a leader.¹² Therefore, women may seek male mentorship due to perceived advantages that masculinity might provide them.

4. Conclusion

Though each woman represented a different industry and an individual background, the shared thematic findings within all the experiences can be connected due to each participant occupying leadership positions in male-dominated industries. Each participant was able to describe instances of belittlement based on their femininity and perceived lack of competency due to expected traits and roles associated with being a woman. When asked to explain what the driving factor was in deciding to occupy a leadership position in male dominated industry, the consensus among all ten participants was their ambition to be the best leader possible.

Traditional literature on men and women in the workforce situates women as less ambitious in comparison to men.¹⁸ In actuality studies show that men and women are more alike than different, suggesting a magnifying glass as necessary to note gendered differences in leadership.²⁹ Other studies show that women are more ambitious than men due to having to work harder to receive recognition. Because men and women are more alike than different, reality is more androgynous as opposed to gendered boxes that limit individual capabilities.

Socialization has impacted how each woman interviewed grew as a leader as well as what they saw their role in society to be. Each woman interviewed is a product of various social and political contingencies that shape the minds of society. In order to move past stereotypical labels and norms, there needs to be a thorough understanding and appropriation of all that constitutes gender and individual leadership styles.⁵ If gender ceased to be fixed premises for social and political manipulation, a new configuration of social, political and economic direction could emerge to better society.⁵

For future research this study could be improved by conducting a greater number of interviews with women in each of the ten industries, as well as adding more industries if available. Accounting for differences in generations allowed the study to capture shifts in social norms as well as providing a greater understanding of how certain generations perceive gender discrimination and whether or not they view it as pertinent to their advancement as leaders. Interviewing a greater number of millennials, generation x, baby boomers, and traditionalists would allow for a more diverse collection of experiences. In addition, conducting interviews in regions beyond Western North Carolina would unveil greater differences in the experiences of females due to variances in social culture throughout the country.

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