



THE CONTROVERSIAL NATURE OF THE "QUEEN BEE" PHENOMENON: FROM SYNDROME TO SURVIVAL STRATEGY OF THE MODERN FEMALE LEADER

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Abstract

Relevance. The aim of this publication is to conduct a theoretical analysis of the socio-psychological phenomenon known in organizational psychology as the "Queen Bee" and to demonstrate the evolution of the understanding of the psychological nature and interpretations of this phenomenon from its emergence in scientific psychological literature (the 1970s) to contemporary publications.

Methodology. The study employs theoretical methods, including the analysis of scientific literature, the generalization of theoretical approaches, and the systematization of scientific data.

Results. The paper provides a review of theoretical approaches to understanding the organizational phenomenon known as the "Queen Bee." The study highlights the origins and evolutionary stages of the phenomenon's definition, ranging from a syndrome of a personality flaw to an adaptive strategy employed by female professionals as a reaction to structural inequality and a discriminatory organizational context. It is emphasized that in the modern world, this phenomenon plays a crucial role in interpreting the interaction mechanisms among women in the professional environment and serves as a reliable indicator of the organizational culture within companies operating in a patriarchally modeled business world.

Keywords: gender discrimination, "Queen Bee" phenomenon, professional environment, female leadership.

Relevance

The relevance of this study stems from the fact that the "Queen Bee" phenomenon remains one of the central research topics on gender inequality within organizations. In the 21st century, despite the increasing number of women in leadership positions, there is a need to reconceptualize this phenomenon through the lens of intersectionality, women's support programs, and organizational culture change.

Purpos of the Publication. The aim of this publication is to conduct a theoretical analysis of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon from the 1970s to the present, tracing the evolution of the concept and its interpretation.

Methodology

Methods. This study presents a theoretical review of available scientific sources dedicated to the "Queen Bee" phenomenon. Content analysis, comparative-historical

analysis, and critical analysis were employed to investigate the evolution of the phenomenon's interpretation from 1974 to 2025.

Results

Rooted in the second wave of feminism, the majority of research on female leadership naturally reflects the ideas of, and is grounded in, the principles of sisterhood and solidarity among women. Consequently, behavior that demonstrates a negative attitude toward female subordinates not only attracts interest but also sparks a certain resonance within the academic community.

First introduced by scholars G.L. Staines, C.A. Tavis, and T.E. Jayaratne in 1974, the term "Queen Bee syndrome" describes a phenomenon where women who achieve high positions in male-dominated structures begin to distance themselves from other women, denying discrimination and exhibiting "masculine" traits (Staines et al., 1974). In a society based on the ideas of female solidarity in the collective struggle against patriarchy, the "Queen Bee" is perceived as a violation and a "betrayal" of the gender role due to the replication of male behavioral patterns (individualism, competition, distancing, etc.). Unable to justify such behavior, the manifestation of this "syndrome" is attributed to the personality traits of the specific individual woman, focusing on personal flaws and thereby reaffirming the feminist ideal of the second wave: a successful female leader serves as an example and support for other women.

In the same year, 1974, *Scripts People Live*, a book by transactional analyst Claude Steiner, was published. As a committed feminist, he invited his colleague Hogie Wyckoff to write a chapter dedicated to women's scripts. Despite the sociocultural paradigm of the time, and while citing the aforementioned article, the chapter's author presents a more positive perspective on the phenomenon (Steiner, 1974). She identifies the "Queen Bee" as a distinct life script, wherein success is interpreted as the result of personal effort rather than the overcoming of systemic barriers. This reflects a defensive belief that any woman can achieve success on her own, without specific support or structural changes, and therefore solidarity is deemed unnecessary.

In the 1980s, the topic of female leadership began to gain momentum, yet the analysis remained superficial. The perspective on the "Queen Bee" phenomenon was predominantly negative, individual-centric, and simplistic. The first indication of the multidimensionality of the phenomenon under study appeared in the works of Rosabeth Moss Kanter (Kanter, 1977), who investigated women in corporations. The concept of tokenism posited that a woman acting as a "token" – a solitary representative of a group – is subjected to immense pressure: she must constantly demonstrate her competence and avoid association with her group (women) to mitigate stereotyping. This systemic pressure partially justified "Queen Bee" behavior as a consequence rather than a cause.

Over time, as the context of feminist waves shifted, psychologists began to question the universality of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon. A study conducted in the early 1990s by



Robin J. Ely on the impact of organizational demography on relationships among female professionals demonstrated that the scarcity of women at the top influences women's social identity and fosters tension and criticism between senior and junior female colleagues. Junior women perceived that successful female partners attained their status by distancing themselves from their gender identity and adopting masculine norms necessary for survival in a male-dominated culture (Ely, 1994).

It was at this point that a debate emerged: is this truly a "syndrome," or rather a consequence of a discriminatory environment? These reflections were underpinned by the works of Nancy J. Chodorow, a renowned representative of psychoanalytic and feminist theory. Although she did not directly investigate the "Queen Bee syndrome," she contributed to explaining this phenomenon through the theory of the social reproduction of gender roles and the influence of patriarchal structures. Specifically, the scholar noted that by constructing femininity within a patriarchal framework, a woman learns to value the "masculine" over the "feminine." In business or academia, this leads female leaders to "copy" the male leadership style and devalue femininity in their colleagues (Chodorow, 1994, 1999).

Extending the psychoanalytic paradigm and emphasizing unconscious processes, it can be added that the "Queen Bee" may act not out of rational hostility toward women, but from an unconscious desire to dissociate from the "weak" and be accepted into the male community.

The next significant step in understanding prejudice against female leadership, including harsh criticism from other women, was the Role Congruity Theory proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002). This theory explains how the incongruity of expectations driven by gender role stereotypes influences the perception of female leaders by their female subordinates. Young women often expect greater support and mentorship from female leaders than from their male counterparts. When these expectations are not met, it results in harsher and more critical evaluations of their leadership compared to that of men, which, in turn, may reinforce a generalized negative attitude toward female leadership as a whole (Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J., 2002).

A revision of the concept occurred in the 2010s, driven by the works of Belle Derks and her colleagues. They demonstrated that the "Queen Bee" phenomenon is not a cause but a consequence of a sexist context: when women experience social identity threat in masculine environments, they may distance themselves from "femininity" and even from other women in a desire to associate with the dominant group (men) as a coping strategy. Research findings led by P.R. Arvate also indicate that manifestations of the "syndrome" diminish in less discriminatory organizations. This highlights the role of organizational culture in shaping the phenomenon and raises the question of institutional, rather than solely individual, responsibility (Arvate et al., 2018; Derks et al., 2011, 2016).

The shift in the theoretical paradigm facilitated the interpretation of the "Queen Bee"

phenomenon not as a cause, but as a coping strategy of the female leader and a symptom of a systemic problem. While research in the 2010s explained why the "Queen Bee" behaves this way, studies in the 2020s have shifted their focus to how employees react to it.

A significant study assessing the detrimental impact of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon on the management of female teams was conducted by Baykal et al. (2020). They demonstrated that the tendency to distance oneself from subordinates often creates an adverse work environment, which in turn can lead to high staff turnover rates among subordinates (Baykal et al. 2020). Attempting to understand the essence and underlying structure of the "Queen Bee" syndrome from the perspective of women who have experienced it, Elham Ebrahimi conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the phenomenon in 2021. This study confirmed that such behavior creates a hostile and unfavorable work environment for female subordinates, instilling in them a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness (Ebrahimi, 2021).

A shift in the general research direction was facilitated by the development and validation of the scale for the perception of Queen Bee Syndrome (SPQBS) by Yuan-Yuan Chan and Jin Feng Uen in 2024. The scale systematizes the primary manifestations of the phenomenon, offering an assessment across key dimensions such as alienated relationship, constrained communication, constrained reliance, ineffective mentoring, and constrained development. This work is of significant value as it aids in better understanding the specific behavioral patterns that shape the negative experience of subordinates, allowing for an investigation of the phenomenon not from the leader's perspective, but through the lens of how this syndrome is perceived by female subordinates (Chan & Uen, 2024).

Research into the perspective of female subordinates and their unconscious reaction to the masculine behavior of the "Queen Bee" has led to the introduction of a new term: the "Worker Bee syndrome." Female subordinates unconsciously construct a collective defense mechanism, exhibiting biases against their female manager that are essentially similar to the prejudices typically attributed to the "Queen Bee" herself. A crucial role in this interaction is played by the reinforcement of female group identity, which serves as compensation for the negative experience of interacting with a female leader who demonstrates inconsistent femininity. Thus, the understanding of the phenomenon expands to suggest that its consequence may be a two-sided "battle" in the hive, in which subordinates also participate by forming biases against their female leaders (Baykal & Surucu, 2025).

Systematic reviews of contemporary publications indicate that due to biased attitudes, inequality in career opportunities, a lack of institutional support, and high competition among women in leadership positions, the phenomenon still exists but manifests less overtly thanks to implemented changes in corporate culture. The emphasis is increasingly shifting toward studying the impact of the phenomenon on subordinates, as women who encounter "Queen Bee" behavior from their managers not only demonstrate lower job



commitment and an intention to quit but are also less likely to aspire to leadership positions in the future. The primary consequences of its manifestation remain emotional burnout and the impediment of other women's career development.

Under favorable conditions, female leaders more often become mentors rather than "Queen Bees," which underscores the importance of contextual factors. The "Queen Bee" phenomenon disappears when women reach a critical mass in leadership (approximately 30–40%); this reduces the pressure of "exceptionalism" and allows for women's authentic expression, including identification with their gender group and support for other women.

Furthermore, media and popular articles usually ignore the systemic and psychological context of the phenomenon and often exaggerate it, focusing on individual conflict and creating the image of "a woman hindering other women" (Da Rocha et al., 2024; Faniko et al., 2021). The creation of a myth regarding hostility and the constant portrayal of the "Queen Bee" as an exclusively female phenomenon fuels the idea that women are their own worst enemies in the workplace and shifts responsibility away from gender and organizational aspects.

Discussion

A review of the scientific literature indicates that the interpretation of the "Queen Bee" phenomenon has evolved from individual to structural explanations, reflecting shifts in research paradigms within feminist theory. A comparison of different feminist waves reveals that the behavior of a female leader is currently viewed as a product of the interaction between individual and organizational factors, rather than as a "betrayal" of the gender role.

It is crucial to note that the majority of classic studies were conducted in North America (Staines, Tavis & Jayaratne, 1974; Ellemers et al., 2004; Arvate et al., 2018; etc.) and Western Europe (Derks, Van Laar & Ellemers, 2011, 2016; Faniko et al., 2021; etc.), which limits the universality of the findings. The scarcity of comparative data from the post-Soviet region, as well as a lack of research, creates gaps in understanding the phenomenon in a global context.

For instance, the question remains: how do historical, economic, and cultural factors in the post-Soviet space, where ideas of emancipation and the woman's role in the workplace developed differently than in the West, influence the manifestations and perception of the phenomenon? Furthermore, is the manifestation of the phenomenon as an individualistic survival strategy more pronounced in collectivist cultures, where distancing oneself from the group constitutes a more severe social transgression than in individualistic cultures, where competition is the norm? How do this phenomenon and racial bias intersect? Is the manifestation of the phenomenon among transgender women in leadership positions a survival strategy or a defense against transphobia?

Additionally, the media often exaggerate the displays of the "syndrome," perpetuating the negative stereotype of the "successful woman who hinders other women," invoking the famous phrase by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women" (Albright, M., 2006 October 6), thereby overemphasizing the importance of female solidarity. However, as contemporary research indicates, actual occurrences of the "Queen Bee syndrome" are largely determined by organizational and social contexts, rather than solely by the individual traits of women. All these limitations underscore the necessity for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research, as well as a deeper analysis of organizational conditions that can both exacerbate and mitigate the phenomenon's manifestations.

Conclusions

Thus, over half a century, the "Queen Bee syndrome" has evolved from a "personality flaw" of a woman to the status of a reaction to sexism, gender discrimination, and structural inequality faced by working professionals. While in the 1970s it was viewed as an "individual female character problem," in the 2020s, it is considered primarily an indicator of the state of organizational culture. Today, most researchers agree that the "Queen Bee syndrome" is a contextually driven adaptive survival strategy of the female professional, emerging as a reaction to a discriminatory context and unrelated to individual "female flaws." Contemporary research confirms that the phenomenon represents a two-sided dynamic rather than unidirectional aggression. "Queen Bee" behavior triggers unconscious biases and hostility among female subordinates, which, in turn, reinforces negative attitudes toward female leadership in general. The most destructive consequence of the phenomenon is its impact on the career aspirations of young women. Even when the manifestation of the phenomenon is perceived as a successful strategy, it leads to reduced leadership motivation and an intention to quit among female subordinates. The new context shifts the research focus: instead of seeking means to "cure the syndrome," scholars and practitioners must focus on exploring opportunities to change organizational culture. Another crucial step is paying attention to the training of female subordinates so they can recognize systemic factors behind "Queen Bee" behavior and reorient their expectations from "sisterly support" to "professional fairness," thereby reducing the effect of the "Worker Bee syndrome." It is proposed that this should be achieved through transparent criteria for employee career advancement, increasing the critical mass of women in leadership, introducing mentorship programs, and other related measures.

Conflicts of Interest. Both authors, including the scientific supervisor and the PhD candidate, declare no conflict of interest that could influence the research results or their interpretation.

Disclaimer: The authors declare that his thoughts and views expressed in this manuscript are not subject to the influence of any organizations.



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