

A WOMAN'S PLACE?

A Cross-National Exploration of Gender Role Perspectives

by Rucha Bhate

*Findings from:
The*

Generations of Talent *Study*



INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, women's labor force participation has risen steadily in most countries. Over the past four decades, in step with this growth, many countries have witnessed noticeable shifts in expectations of gender roles. Despite these trends, however, traditional gender roles are still prevalent in many societies.

So-called traditional gender perspectives encourage married women to put their educational aspirations and career goals on the back burner and focus on starting a family and raising children while their husbands work full time. This gender-based division of labor often leads to opportunity gaps that keep women from leveraging their academic and professional skills to the fullest.

In this brief, we focus on two different notions of gender roles:

- Men and women should spend the same amount of time on family responsibilities, but men should specialize in some domains (such as earning income) and women in others (such as taking care of family members). We label this perspective **equal time/specialized roles**.
- Men and women should share responsibility in all domains (such as earning income and taking care of family members). We label this perspective **equal responsibilities**.

To uncover the roots of these two views of gender roles, we turned to the wealth of data that the Sloan Center on Aging & Work collected for its Generations of Talent (GOT) survey, conducted from May 2009 through November 2010. (Please see the note at the end of this paper for details about this study.) Our analysis centered on responses to questions pertaining to attitudes toward gender roles in work and family by GOT survey participants in seven countries: Brazil, China, India, Japan, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The participants were employees of seven multinational companies doing business in those countries.

We used data on two items from the GOT survey to measure support for the equal time/specialized roles perspective. In the survey, respondents had been asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family.
- It is more important for a wife to advance her husband's career than her own.

We used data on two different items from the survey to measure support for the equal responsibilities perspective. Here again, survey respondents had been asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- If spouses work full time, they should share housework equally.
- Men should share equally with their wives in taking care of young children.

We aggregated the responses to each pair of statements according to the following areas of research interest: by country; by national economic development status; by individual characteristics such as gender, education, and income; and by national cultural differences. For each of these variables, we generated mean (average) scores, which could range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Although it is true that people who score high on one pair of statements (that is, strongly agreeing with it) would logically score low on the other (that is, strongly disagreeing with it), the survey questions asked respondents to indicate how much they agreed with each statement, rather than choosing a statement most in agreement with their own perspectives. This strategy allowed for more nuanced scoring.

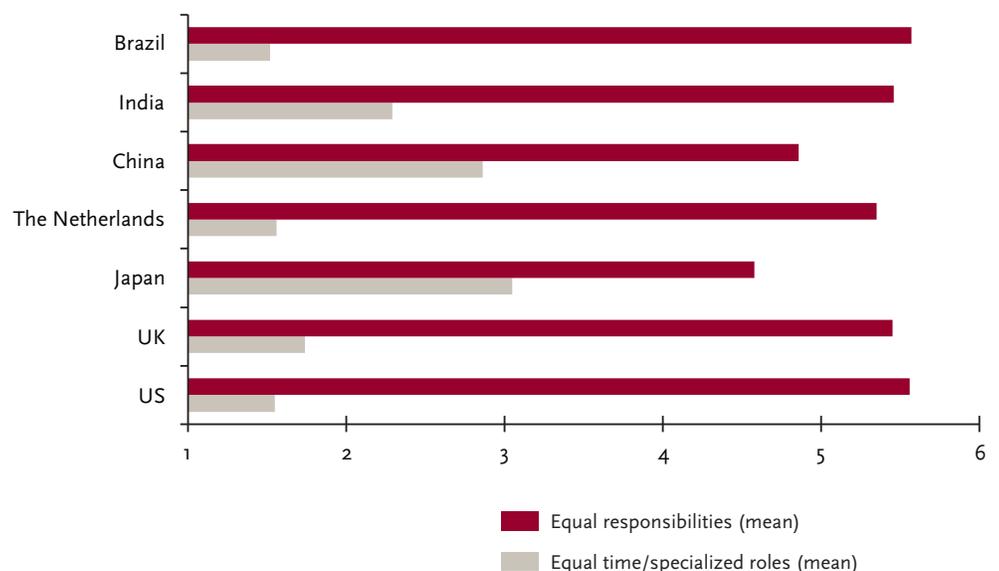
Cross-country measures of the two perspectives of gender roles

As we worked with the data, we wanted to see first if cross-country differences in gender perceptions emerged.

As shown in Figure 1 below, five of the seven countries have mean scores of 5.0 or higher for the equal responsibilities perspective: Brazil, India, The Netherlands, U.K., and U.S. For the equal time/specialized roles perspective, the same countries report quite a low mean score: less than 2.3. China and Japan, in contrast, report the lowest average scores for the equal responsibilities perspective and the highest scores for the equal time/specialized roles perspective.

This distribution of mean scores shows clearly how the employees we surveyed in different countries view a gender-based assignment of work and family duties.

Figure 1. Agreement with the equal responsibilities and equal time/specialized roles perspectives: mean scores by country¹



¹ Total sample size = 8784. By country: U.S.-1156; U.K.-508; China-1532; India-611; Brazil-1549; Japan-2673; The Netherlands-755.

We then turned again to the GOT data to consider the following possible explanations for these cross-country differences:

- status of a country’s economic development²
- demographic and occupational characteristics of individual respondents³
- cultural differences in gender-based values⁴

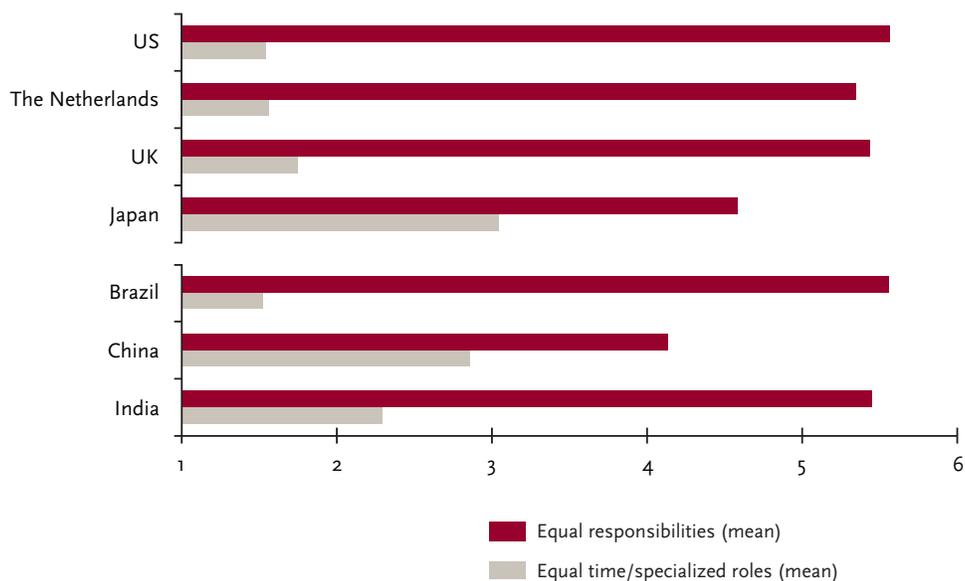
Let’s look at each one in turn.

Can differences in gender role perspectives be attributed to the status of economic development?

A key indicator that can help distinguish established market economies from rapidly developing market economies is per capita national income. We used this statistic to explore possible links between the countries’ economic development status and gender role perspectives. According to the per capita income criterion, in our seven-country sample Brazil, China, and India belong to the category of rapidly developing (emerging) market economies. Japan, The Netherlands, U.S., and U.K. are developed (established) market economies.⁵

As shown in Figure 2 below, no clear pattern—positive or negative—appears when we examine gender role perspectives in terms of the per capita income (in descending order) of the seven selected countries. For example, both the U.S. (a developed economy) and Brazil (a developing economy) exhibit comparable gender role perspectives. Thus, per capita national income (our proxy for the state of economic development) does not have a definitive effect on gender role perspectives.

Figure 2. National income and gender role perspectives: mean scores by country



² Hausmann R, Tyson L, Zahidi S. The global gender gap report 2011. Geneva, Switzerland: World Economic Forum; 2011.

³ Galinsky E, Aumann K, Bond J. Times are changing: gender and generation at work and at home. 2008 National study of the changing workforce. New York: Families and Work Institute; 2009.

⁴ Hofstede G. National cultures in four dimensions: a research-based theory of cultural differences among nations. International Studies of Management & Organization. 1983; 8(1-2):46-74.

⁵ We use current dollar per capita Gross Domestic Product (adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity) as a proxy for national income. The current \$ PCGDP (PPP) values for the seven countries in our sample are as follows: US=\$48442; The Netherlands=\$43339; UK=\$36511; Japan= \$34278; Brazil= \$11719; China=\$8442; India=\$3650.

Can differences in gender role perspectives be attributed to demographic and occupational variables?

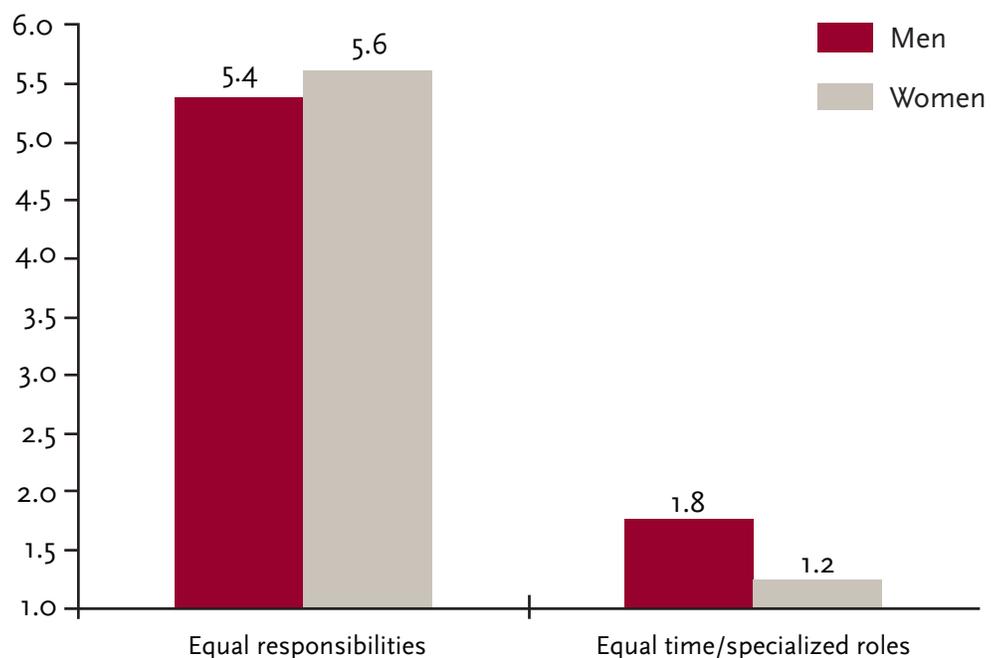
Another informative thought experiment was to see whether gender role perspectives are influenced by standard demographic and occupational variables such as a person's education, income, and gender.

Many of the variables that we looked at in this category are associated with the equal time/specialized roles perspective. For example, the less educated respondents scored higher (agreeing more strongly with this perspective), as did respondents with less income.

We also found many variables associated with the equal responsibilities perspective. For example, respondents with graduate degrees and respondents cohabiting with a spouse or partner scored this perspective higher, suggesting that they are more inclined to gender parity than respondents without graduate degrees and respondents living without a spouse or partner.

The single most important individual variable that emerged from our analysis of the GOT data is gender. That is, women are considerably less likely than men to agree with equal time/specialized roles and somewhat more likely to agree with equal responsibilities. Compared with gender's strong association with gender role perspectives, the association of all other individual factors with gender role perspectives is relatively weak.

Figure 3. Differences in gender role perceptions, by gender⁶

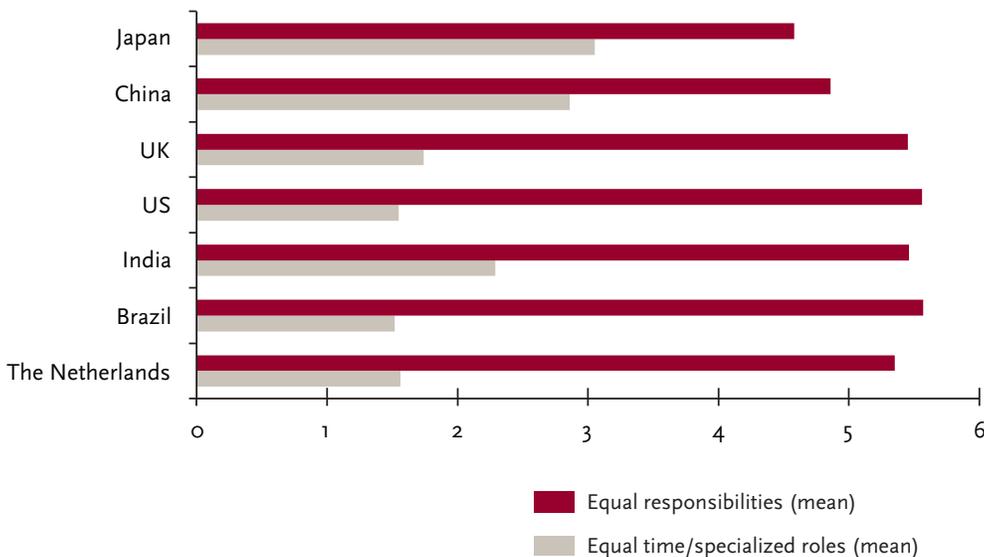


⁶ The numbers reported in this figure are based on statistical models controlling for gender, part-time status, whether the respondent's partner or spouse lives in the household, elder care responsibilities, child care responsibilities, supervisory responsibilities, age, job type, highest educational degree, income, and country. Reference groups are coded 0 (i.e., full-time job, male, no partner in household, no elder care responsibilities, no child care responsibilities, no supervisory responsibilities, under 30 years old, manager, less than a college degree, United States) or centered at the mean (as in the case of income).

Can differences in gender role perspectives be attributed to cultural differences?

We used Geert Hofstede's paradigm that expresses differences in national cultures according to gender (masculine versus feminine dimensions) to assess the extent to which traditional gender roles are assigned in a culture. Figure 4 below follows Hofstede's model to rank the seven selected countries in increasing order of masculinity (with Japan scoring highest in masculinity and the Netherlands scoring lowest) and depicts how gender role perspectives vary in different national cultures.⁷

Figure 4. Culture and gender role perspectives: mean scores by country



As the figure shows, the conventionally masculine societies of China and Japan report relatively higher scores for the equal time/specialized roles perspective and correspondingly lower scores for the equal responsibilities perspective than conventionally feminine societies do. The reverse is true for the traditionally feminine societies of The Netherlands and Brazil: support there is strongest for the equal responsibilities perspective and weakest for the equal time/specialized roles perspective.

⁷ Hofstede's gender dimension relates to the traditional gender roles in a culture: that is, men perceived as relatively more aggressive and competitive and women as more gentle and concerned with work and family.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the Generations of Talent Study

To gather business-relevant information about the work experiences of employees of diverse ages who work in different countries, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College conducted the Generations of Talent (GOT) Study.

From May 2009 through November 2010, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work collaborated with seven multinational companies. In total, 24 worksites in 11 countries participated in the study, and 11,298 employees responded to the survey. Employees were invited to complete one 30-minute online survey during work time, which they were able to access on a secure website. The survey was translated into Japanese, Mandarin Chinese, Brazilian Portuguese, and Spanish. It should, however, be noted that our sample is not representative of the entire population or the workforce in the participating countries.

The survey consists of core questions (questions that were included in the surveys made available to each respondent) and module questions (additional, complementary questions, a subset of which was randomly assigned to the respondents). The survey focused on employees' perceptions of their work experiences, workplace-based resources, demographic information, and employees' assessments of their health and well-being at work and in their lives in general.

Dr. Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes and Dr. Natalia Sarkisian were the co-principal investigators of the GOT study and worked with an international group of 17 colleagues.

About the Author

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About the Sloan Center on Aging & Work

Established in 2005, the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College promotes quality of employment as an imperative for the 21st century multi-generational workforce. We integrate evidence from research with insights from workplace experiences to inform innovative organizational decision-making. Collaborating with business leaders and scholars in a multi-disciplinary dialogue, the center develops the next generation of knowledge and talent management.

Since our founding, we have conducted more than 20 studies in collaboration with employers: for example, studies on “Age & Generations,” “Talent Management,” and “Generations of Talent.” Studies under way are “Assessing the Impact of Time and Place Management” and “Engaged as We Age.”

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