

RESEARCH

Mouna Izelmaden

Understanding Women's Career Experiences in Moroccan Businesses

A Multi-Level Analysis of Gender
Relations

MOREMEDIA



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Abstract

Existing literature on women career development focuses on western industrialized countries and gives little attention to regions where patriarchy is prevailing like in North African countries. The limited available research in the region takes a business-oriented perspective to investigate the topic and focuses on business process optimization for an increased profitability. In an attempt to close this gap, the present PhD project takes a sociological lens to investigate meanings and interpretations that skilled women in Moroccan organizations give to their experiences. This project sought to understand how Moroccan professional women take decisions about their career path while taking a multi-level approach to examine contextual factors. In this thesis, Bourdieu's theory of practice was used as a theoretical framework to examine the interplay of the different factors impacting the development of women career paths. Using a qualitative research approach under the interpretivist paradigm, and drawing on in-depth interviews with 10 participants, this research investigated female and male conceptualization of career and work objectives. The interplay between *field*, *capital*, and *habitus* has allowed to investigate the gender relation in the workplace and in the society in general and its impact on career practice, by giving voice to both women and men to share their life and work interpretations.

The findings showed that the symbolic order of differentiated gender roles that emanate from the traditional gender hierarchies held in the Moroccan society is reproduced, and proliferate in the participant's workplaces, more intensively in male-dominated work environments which found to be "mini-patriarchies". Female participants have understood the "rules of the game" of their respective career fields, and played within the limits of their habitus and according to their

capital portfolio composition. Results demonstrated how the classed and gendered capital portfolio plays a major role in impacting the quality of female professional experiences, and their ability to overcome encountered barriers. Indeed, findings suggest that differential access to capitals shapes identities and approaches to the different social fields, and guides participants to navigate in their patriarchal and gendered work environments. The results point to three main strategies adopted by female career agents as either: *fighters*, *conformers*, or *jugglers*. The strategies adopted depended on individual agency of female participants and personal conceptualization of work and gender role, but also on the existence of moderating factors, namely: a supporting family and spouse, domestic help, and social network. Results showed that these moderating factors play the role of career “boosters” that can change the nature of the professional experience and orient career decisions.

This project contributes to enrich literature about female career practice in the context of a Muslim North African country, using a relational and multi-level approach. It also contributes to the operationalization of the theory of practice in a gender research topic, demonstrating the added value that the interplay between Bourdieu’s concepts could have in understanding complex patriarchal societies. From a methodological point of view, this project enriches literature about performing research in traditional contexts without using a recording device to collect data.

Keywords: Capital · Female career · Morocco · Career field · Gender relation · Habitus · Practice · Symbolic domination · North Africa

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Abbreviations

BMZ	Bundesministerium für Wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit (German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development)
EEO	Equal Employment Opportunity
EU	European Union
GGGI	Global Gender Gap Index
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German International Cooperation)
HR	Human Resources
IT	Information Technologies
LE	Large Entreprises
LMD	Licence Master Doctorat
ME	Middle East
ME	Micro Enterprises
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MMC	Muslim Majority Country
NGO	Non-Government Organization
QCA	Qualitative Content Analyses
RQ	Research Question
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
STEM	Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics
USA	United States of America
VSME	Very Small and Medium Enterprises



Introduction

1

1.1 The Problem of Women Career Research in the MENA Region

Literature about women and career in western developed countries has received fair share of interest and attention, and suggests the complexity of the topic due to the gendered social contexts (Hatmaker, 2012; O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). The persistent barriers related to preconceptions about women and men’s roles in societies continue to hinder women from developing their career in organizational contexts (Sharp, Franzway, Mills, & Gill, 2012). Women are facing a large number of constraints regarding their access to the formal labour market, such as biases in the recruitment and selection processes (Davidson & Burke, 2004), limited training opportunities (Wirth, 2001), and gender stereotypes (G. N. Powell, 2000). Empirical studies undertaken in Western industrialized countries have demonstrated that despite the large range of organizational initiatives and equal opportunity laws, women and other discriminated-against groups continue to remain disadvantaged in organizations in comparison to their male counterparts (Junankar, Paul, & Yasmeen, 2004).

Those observations are made in western and developed-economic contexts and do not give sufficient insights on gender dynamics and practices in regions where patriarchy and tribal culture is prevailing (Metcalf, 2007). Omair (2008) argues that constraints and discrimination faced by women in organizational contexts are even more extreme in countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where a strict code of gender segregation is maintained and where women’s role revolves around family. In those regions, women are expected to stay at home and raise children, whereas men are the “breadwinners” who are expected to work and bring-in the financial resources (Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston,

2016). Indeed, women in more conservative cultures are badly represented in the labour market, with greater disparities in managerial and senior positions despite the increasing numbers of qualified and skilled female professionals (Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Kemp, Madsen, & Davis, 2015). In such contexts, women who engage in a professional activity are the target of direct and explicit gender-bias, leading to negative outcomes on career development and to adverse psychological effects (Basford, Offerman, & Behrend, 2014; Bosson, Pine, & Vandello, 2010; Conway-Long, 2002).

The majority of the existing literature focuses on Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Lebanon, etc., and treats topic of women career progression from a business administration and management perspective covering topics such as the glass-ceiling, work-life balance, career success, and women leadership (Abdalla, 2015; Hutchings, Dawn Metcalfe, & Cooper, 2010; Jayashree, Lindsay, & McCarthy, 2020; Kamenou-Aigbekaen & Thory, 2016; Karam & Afiouni, 2014; Kemp et al., 2015; Omair, 2010; Tlaiss, 2014a, 2015; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). Literature that discusses North African countries and specifically the context of Morocco is even scarcer. The available research seems also to take a business perspective and investigates in its majority topics of human resources and diversity management, female entrepreneurship, and work-life balance (Aboussaid & Angade, 2018; Constantinidis, Lebègue, El Abboubi, & Salman, 2019; Giraud, Sahraoui, & Frimousse, 2020; Lekchiri, Crowder, Schnerre, & Eversole, 2019; Lekchiri & Eversole, 2021; Sahraoui Bentaleb, 2016; Semlali & Hassi, 2016). In addition to that, most of the available research on Morocco is published in the French language, making its contribution limited to the French speaking academia.

Some authors explain the dearth of research on women's professional experiences in Muslim and Arab countries by their relatively low levels of labour participation (Sidani, 2005). Others report the difficulty to perform empirical studies concerning gender and women in those traditional regions which may explain the limited amount of literature (Janine, 2006). Tlaiss (2014a) posits that research that investigates women's work experiences have underplayed agency and personal choices and overlooked their impact on career orientation. This dearth of research investigating women in traditional cultures like in MENA regions, indicates the need for more inclusive approaches to gather a well-rounded impression of female professional experiences (Lekchiri et al., 2019).

Furthermore, existing literature is characterized by single level studies which mainly focuses on either macro-structural conditions, meso-organizational realities, or micro-agentic dynamics of experiences and practices in the workplace (Brammer, Millington, & Pavelin, 2009; Cox & Blake, 1991; Thomas, 2001).

This single-level approach is incomplete as it tends to overemphasize one aspect for the detriment of the others. Therefore, there is a dearth of multi-level research on gender equality and equal opportunities—in non-western contexts- that aims at understanding how gender practices contribute to the (re)production of power hierarchies in work environments. There is a need of research taking into account macro-societal factors (e.g. culture, religion, laws), meso-organizational factors (e.g. organizational processes, behavior at work, gender relations), and micro-individual factors (e.g. individual power, motivation, agency to affect change) (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009).

This project is attempting to contribute to enrich literature about North African Maghrebi countries by taking the case of Morocco as an example. This project investigates practices that skilled women enact in their professional experiences and tries to understand how does gender frame their interactions in their work-places and how do they make sense of their decisions. Morocco is a developing country dominated by conservative norms and practices, and patriarchal ideologies that legitimate female subordination and support male supremacy (Sadiqi, 2008). At the same time, the country of Morocco is very much impacted by the Western and European cultures, and since its independence from France in 1956, it seems to be still searching for a balance between “modern” and progressive values, and conservative and traditional roots. Despite the achievements in terms of human development, and, ratification of international conventions for the protection of female rights and their involvement in the political, social, and economic life, women’s position in the society continue to be marked by prejudice, inequality, and injustice.

1.2 Research Objectives and Theoretical Framework

In this research, the focus is on the subjectivity of highly skilled Moroccan women in deploying their personal strategies guiding their decisions about their work, and career pathways and orientations. This project is shedding light on how women perceive their environments and how they navigate themselves in a social and organizational context which is highly gendered and how do they make sense of their own professional experiences. For the purpose of understanding the effect of the work environment on the subjective decisions taken by women, this project contrasts different work environments. This research contrasts work environments that are male dominated, with work environments that were not reported as being either male or female dominated, called in this thesis gender-balanced. This research attempts to understand how Moroccan skilled professional women

decide about their work and career orientations by exploring the experiences they live in their workplace. The project particularly sheds light on the social relations at the interpersonal level and discusses how these relations are shaped by macro-level cultural beliefs about gender, and meso-organizational interactions and experiences. In order to achieve that, it was important to uncover their own career motivations and explore the different obstacles that they encounter, and develop an understanding of their career practice while trying to attain their objectives.

In the light of the above, the main research question of this project is as follow:

How do Moroccan skilled women make their decisions about their career paths?

Two sub-questions are answered:

- What factors affect their decisions at three levels of analysis; micro, meso, and macro?
- How does the work environment in male-dominated versus gender-balanced workplaces affect their career decisions?

This thesis discusses the invisible power processes and structures that are framed by cultural traditions, which continually recreate gender inequality in the workplace. Theoretically and methodologically this research is situated in sociology and has its roots in gender studies and intersectionality¹, while exploring a topic that has been mostly searched from a management and business perspective. This Approach nurtures the production of critical knowledge and helps facing the challenges of the complex category of gender by relating it in a transversal way with other categories like class, and age (Zafra-Aparici, Garcia-Moreno, & Egbe, 2021). In the context of Morocco, gender interacts with several factors like history, religion, multilingualism, social organization, class, educational level, etc. (Ennaji, 2010). Therefore, the research approach contributes to the understanding of the historical and sociocultural factors that influence women participation in the labour market, and tries to understand women' experiences from an agency perspective. The purpose of this research is not to develop or test (a) theory(ies), but it is rather aiming to explore and understand the perceptions and experiences of female employees in Moroccan workplaces.

¹ Intersectionality is a socio-legal approach that has allowed the identification and classification of complex realities and inequalities (Walby et al., 2017).

With an objective to contribute to the North African scholarly literature, this PhD project presents a multi-level perspective of gender relation in the Moroccan labour market by focusing on experiences and interpretations of professional career agents. This thesis examines the influence and interplay of a different set of factors, from both women and men's perspectives and how they impact gender status and equal opportunities in the workplace. In this project, a relational and multi-level framework is used to analyze and interpret practices in the workplace, in a context of a Muslim North-African country like Morocco. The framework is based on Bourdieu's sociological theory in which the concepts of capital and strategies at the micro-level, habitus at the meso-level and field at the macro-level of analysis are used to operationalize his project of social research. According to Bourdieu, capitals and strategies are generated and legitimized by the logic of habitus and the field, whereas, field and habitus owe their existence to the actions of individuals, who strategically set up different forms of capital at their disposal (Bourdieu, 1990b). Central in Bourdieu's framework is the use of the interdependency between capital, strategies, field and habitus and their relationality with each other (Bourdieu, 1998; Nash, 2003; Özbilgin & Tatli, 2005) as an alternative to the analytical dualism between individual and society or agency and structure (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). This work brings novelty by using the framework of the grand theory of Bourdieu and its relational perspective to investigate gender power hierarchies within and outside the workplace in a patriarchal context in a North African country. It contributes to enrich literature about gender research in the Moroccan context by giving voice to both women and men.

1.3 Thesis Structure

This PhD thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, briefly presented and introduced the thesis by stating the research problem and defining the objectives of this project, as well as describing the content of the thesis.

Chapter 2 presents and defines the major concepts related to gender, and gender inequalities at the broader level discussing roles and stereotypes before going into the context of the workplace. This chapter touches on the different theories explaining gender inequalities in the workplace and exposes the manifestations of inequalities in the labour market in western regions as well as in developing countries. After giving an overview of the different schools of thoughts for achieving equality, the chapter unpacks the specificities of gender relationships in contexts of traditional and patriarchal cultures of the MENA region through a

discussion about gender regimes and their impact on gender inequalities in the region.

Chapter 3 sets the theoretical framework of the project. First, the multi-level approach will be discussed as well as its pertinence in such complex research contexts. Then the main elements of Bourdieu's theory of practice (1972), namely field, capital and habitus will be defined and an illustration of the interplay of these elements will be clarified. Furthermore, Bourdieu's key concepts will be discussed in a female career context in order to locate the present research within the theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 reviews and describes the specific Moroccan context. After having introduced the MENA region as a whole and put forward elements of its heterogeneity, this chapter gives a holistic overview about the national context of the country of research by giving a historical, demographic, and economic overview. The chapter discusses also the different sources of power and their pertinence in understanding gender hierarchies and disparities between women and men in the society. It also discusses the status of women from a legal perspective and presents the situation of female participation in the labour market.

In chapter 5, the research design of this project is presented. After situating and defining the epistemological position of this work, the research methodology and methods are described and justified. Using a qualitative research approach, this project relies on semi-structured interviews to collect empirical data. The chapter presents and justifies also the sampling approach that has been used which relied on important criteria the participants had to meet to be included into the study. Furthermore, a description of the data analysis method is given, then quality criteria and ethical considerations close-up the chapter.

In chapter 6, the empirical results will be reported and presented in thick descriptions and using quotations from the interview summaries. Chapter 7 is the last part of the thesis contains discussions of the results and conclusion. In this chapter results are discussed and interpreted in a broader context, and are contrasted with existing literature. This chapter also reports contributions of the research, reports potential limitations, and suggests ideas for potential future research. Before wrapping-up the dissertation with a conclusion that briefly summarizes the findings and recalls the major objectives, a note entailing reflections about the research journey will be reported.



Gender Inequality in the Workplace: Concepts and Perspectives

2

In almost all societies around the world and throughout history, sex and gender have been key elements of inequality in which men occupied higher social status and benefited from more legal and political rights. Equality is a state or condition of being the same in terms of social status, legal or political rights (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). According to A. P. Fiske and Haslam (2006), social activity is coordinated in different forms of social bonds. Relationships based on the communal sharing principle are about generosity, collective belonging, and being a unit together. Equality matching is about balance, ensuring that everyone in the relationship is given an equal share. Authority ranking is defined by hierarchy and status differences between people, accompanied by uneven distribution. Finally, relationships based on market pricing are guided by calculative reasoning by each individual with the aim of maximizing individual outcomes (Lee & Kray, 2021, p. 2). But when it comes to gender and equality the communal sharing principle is not valid and it is rather a status difference that is taken into account.

What remains central in gender research and in feminism is the question of whether equality requires all women to be treated the same as men regardless of their differences, or whether equality involves the recognition of the large display of differences to be identified and recognized. When considering differences between the two, beliefs about the characteristics of men and women tend to be organized along two general dimensions: agency and communion (Lee & Kray, 2021). Agency encompasses character traits such as assertiveness, achievement orientation and autonomy; while communality symbolizes emotional sensitivity, attention, and affiliation with others (Sczesny, Nater, & Eagly, 2018). These dimensions constitute the central substance of gender stereotypes, which describe men as agentic, being self-confident and independent, and women as communal with high sense of caring, and as being helpful and sociable (Hentschel,

Heilman, & Peus, 2019). Women are characterized as more communal, as concerned about other's welfare, and described by words like "affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle". On the other hand, men are considered as having an assertive, controlling, confident tendency, and described by words like "aggressive, ambitious, dominant, forceful, independent, daring, self-confident, and competitive" (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 783). This constituted the patterns of the gendered division of labour that stereotypically pre-destine women to domestic cores and men to work outside of the public sphere.

Indeed, today's divisions in the labour market are products of historical processes, rooted back in the industrial revolution and the modern organization of work (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Prior to the industrial revolution, both men and women participated in small scale, and family-managed, agricultural, and manufacturing work. Preindustrial work was divided along gender lines, with some of these divisions persisting to date, such as women's predominance in textile labour (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). The industrial revolution replaced family work by paid labour in factories and mines performed by white men, while women worked in unpaid labour of household work (Padavic & Reskin, 2002). Therefore, the white middle-class ideology of separate spheres further paved the gendered division of labour, and portrayed homemaking as the appropriate occupation for women, while men's natural place is the public sphere where work is paid (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). The realities in which industrial work was performed, which was male-dominated, full of stereotypes about masculinity and femininity as well as an emerging status hierarchy based on the gendered division of labour, has resulted in an ongoing effect on the kind of occupations, opportunities and pay each group received (Acker, 2006). The ideology of the white middle-class man has led to the creation of the ideal worker norm and to the separation of work and domestic spheres: one central mechanism through which gender inequality is implicated and reproduced in the workplace. The ideal worker norm portrays a worker fully devoted to the workplace and to work, with no competing demands (Williams, 2006). Although the ideal worker has no explicit gender, but given that women bear most of the household and childcare responsibilities, the ideal worker traits of devotion and expectations are incongruent with women's gender role. Women are therefore less likely to be perceived as ideal worker for many jobs (Kalev & Deutsch, 2018).

Literature describes career as having evolved from a series of jobs to a process of all work-related events that take place over the life span of a person (Hall, 2002). In this regard, scholars have defined career development as an ongoing process of planning and directed actions toward personal work and life

goals (Simonsen, 1997). Literature is mostly dominated by the traditional career models, although new theories started to emerge supporting non-linear careers that offer alternative perspectives and address issues unique to the contemporary workers (Enache, Sallan, Simo, & Fernandez, 2011; Hall, 2002; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). This refers to the full-time, long-term employment within one organization in which career development is considered as a hierarchical and linear process, and where success is manifested by a salary increase and promotion (Cook, Heppner, & O'Brien, 2002; Hertneky, 2012). The major constraint with the traditional career model is its separation of work and family roles which reinforces the conditions of disadvantage encountered by employees, for example women, seeking a non-traditional career path (Hertneky, 2012; Laud & Johnson, 2013).

When looking at women's careers, they are significantly impacted by their life context and are not necessarily predictable as women are brought to juggle and make decisions to balance between their work and private life (Dries, 2011). Women career development is then described from some scholars as discontinuous with off-and-on ramps where women opt in and out (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). These terms reflect gender biases as women career decisions are being analyzed with the prevailing male-dominated organizational norms and have a negative connotation that pretends that the only way to success is through organizational hierarchy (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2013; M. Shapiro, Ingols, & Blake-Beard, 2008). Therefore, women's unusual non-linear career paths are mostly seen as unfavorable and negatively impacting their career development as they are not in conformity with a non-stop full-time employment (Acker, 2006; M. Shapiro et al., 2008). As an alternative perspective to the traditional career model, research suggests boundaryless careers that move across traditional organizational boundaries and challenges traditional employment arrangements (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). Hall (1996) suggested for example the protean career, which is "driven by the person not the organization, and will be reinvented by the person from time to time, as the person and the environment change" (Hall, 1996, p. 10).

Female career has hardly made significant improvements despite increasing efforts to improve women's position in society, through an equal access to opportunities and resources. There is a large body of literature about women career progression and about factors influencing their trajectories, either by helping or hindering them. Research suggests that women career advancement is a complicated topic because of the different barriers and hurdles imposed by the gendered social contexts (Hatmaker, 2012). Regardless of where the women are from or what jobs they have, they still face barriers related to gender role stereotypes

and structural hierarchies throughout their careers (Miller, 2004; O'Neil, 2008; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005). Women are still tied to roles predefined by society which hinder their decisions about their own lives. For example, they are held the first responsible for housework and childcaring and their career is very much dependent on their family-life and on their decision to have children. In addition to that, research done in Europe, North America and Asia, report that women give priority to the needs of their husbands and children at the detriment of their career progression for example by reducing working hours or even leaving their jobs for the sake of better managing their family life (McKay et al., 2016).

In the labour market, gender stereotypes that have been prescribed regarding the role of women over the years, and the actions of the others who detain an influence, have hindered women's progression at work. Most of the barriers identified as hindering women's advancement were found to be consequences of gender stereotypes. Despite their increased numbers in the labour force, women are still segregated in occupations that are perceived to require communal, but not agentic attributes. On the other hand, men more than women, are rather employed in occupations requiring agentic attributes, leading to further segregation in the labour market. In addition to segregation, women are still facing other barriers in the workplace, such as difficulties in accessing higher hierarchical positions, having an equitable salary, or even facing sexual violence. However, before discussing the different forms of gender inequalities taking place in the labour market, the coming section starts first by defining the general concepts related to gender in order to set the ground for further discussions.

2.1 Gender Roles and Stereotypes

The concept of gender is central in creating an understanding of women's underrepresentation in any social context, given the eloquent role it fulfills in casting a definitional mold in which women are put. The concept of gender, as it is known now was first used during the early 1970s with the growing interest in women's issues that brought concerns about how to phrase the questions researchers asked. Scholars who have concentrated their efforts on the differences between women and men have used the term sex differences (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). However, controversy quickly arose about terminology (Brannon, 2011). The critics objected that the used term of "sex differences" carries biological implications as a basis for studying these differences. In addition, the objections concerned the extensive use of the term for a large number of different research purposes, for example; chromosomal configuration, reproductive physiology, as well as for

behavioral research (Unger, 1979). Rhonda Unger (1979) proposed the term “gender” as an alternative terminology that describes the traits and behaviors that are regarded by the culture as proper to women and men. The term gender becomes therefore a social label rather than a biological description and includes the characteristics that the culture assigns to each sex as well as the features that individuals assign to themselves. It is an analytical category to make a distinction between biological sex differences and inform behaviors and competencies which were then assigned as either “masculine” or “feminine”.

Affirming a sex versus gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a perception among women that they were naturally better suited for “domestic” spheres (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). Feminists used the term gender to lay the ground for further exploration of the distinction between women and men in societies and criticize the patriarchal interpretations. For example, Ann Oakley notes in her text *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) how Western cultures seem most predisposed to exaggerate gender differences and set women’s role as housewives and mothers for a supposedly “social efficiency” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). Earlier than that—precisely in the 1950’s- Simone de Beauvoir underlines in her discussions that gender differences are established and used in hierarchical oppositions. Through her statement “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”, in her book “*The second Sex*” (1997, p. 295) she emphasizes that the masculine principle is always the favored “norm” and the feminine one is positioned as the “other” or the continual outsider. She argues also that femininity can only be defined as lack, so that civilization was masculine to its very depth, and women the continual outsiders (De Beauvoir, 1997, p. 295). The majority of feminists in the 70’s embraced the idea of gender as being a construct at the exception of very few such as Firestone and some cultural feminists, who questioned whether all key differences are an effect of culture rather than biology (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016). Firestone claimed that the only way for women to escape men’s oppression is to free themselves from the burden of childbirth, which was according to her, seen by patriarchy as a weakness (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2016).

Confusion has afterwards gained terrain, and the distinction between sex and gender was then unclear as gender has become merely another word for sex and at the same time a contested political term (Oakley & Mitchell, 1997). In order to bring clarity in the confusion, West and Zimmerman (1987) brought a distinction between sex, sex category and gender. The authors defined sex as a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as female or male: the criteria can be genitalia