

Intra-Gender Exploitation Among Women at Workplace: A Socio-Organizational and Psychological Analysis

Mitali Saikia

Department of Assamese, Tezpur College

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2026.150600106>

Received: 04 July 2026; Accepted: 09 July 2026; Published: 13 July 2026

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of intra-gender workplace exploitation—specifically women targeting other women—presents a complex, multi-layered challenge within modern corporate and academic environments. While historical gender studies have focused extensively on patriarchal, inter-gender power dynamics, contemporary organizational research demonstrates that women face distinct, often invisible psychological and professional hurdles from their female peers and superiors. Evaluating this behavior strictly through an individual psychological lens risks oversimplifying complex workplace realities. This paper examines intra-gender exploitation not as isolated interpersonal friction, but as a systemic pathology shaped by institutional power structures, structural scarcity, and intersecting socio-demographic variables including age, cultural background, and hierarchical status.

Understanding the mechanisms of intra-gender exploitation is paramount for modern human resource management and organizational psychology. When women exploit other women, the underlying psychological toll frequently results in diminished productivity, acute career stagnation, and severe somatic or psychological distress for the victims. To achieve genuine women's empowerment, organizations must look beyond legal box-checking and address the toxic subcultures that pit female professionals against one another in an artificially constrained corporate ecosystem.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To build a rigorous foundation for analyzing intra-gender exploitation, this study relies on two primary conceptual pillars: **Social Identity Theory** and the **Queen Bee Syndrome** model. These frameworks shift the analytical focus away from localized, misogynistic tropes of "cattiness" and instead contextualize conflict within the structural parameters of the organization.

Social Identity Theory and Self-Group Distancing

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, **Social Identity Theory** posits that individuals define their self-concept based on their perceived membership in social groups. In a historically male-dominated corporate structure, the dominant group (men) possesses high social status and institutional power, while the subordinate group (women) navigates a marginalized identity. When individuals from a low-status group attempt to advance within an organization, they encounter two primary tracks: collective action or individual mobility.

In hyper-competitive or unsupportive corporate environments, women often realize that collective advancement is blocked by glass ceilings. Consequently, they choose the track of individual mobility. To achieve personal success and find acceptance within the dominant male coalition, these women employ a psychological strategy known as **self-group distancing**. By physically and behaviorally separating themselves from other women, they signal to the dominant power structure that they are "different" from the stereotypical female worker. This psychological alienation forms the baseline for relational aggression and systematic gatekeeping against junior female colleagues.

The Queen Bee Syndrome

First identified in 1973 by University of Michigan researchers G. Staines, T. Jayaratne, and C. Tavris, the **Queen Bee Syndrome** describes a specific behavioral profile: a woman who achieves career success in a male-dominated hierarchy but subsequently uses her authority to stall the advancement of subordinate women.

[Sexist/Toxic Culture] —> [Social Identity Threat] —> [Self-Group Distancing] —> [Queen Bee Behavior]

Modern organizational psychology emphasizes that Queen Bee behavior is a *response* to systemic gender discrimination rather than an inherent gender defect. When an organization operates with implicit gender biases, a female leader's professional identity is constantly threatened. To protect her hard-won position, she assimilates into the existing toxic culture. She internalizes patriarchal leadership metrics—such as hyper-authoritarian oversight and transactional detachment—and applies them with distinct severity toward other women, legitimizing the very inequality that originally restricted her.

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to fulfill four core academic and practical objectives:

- **Objective 01:** To isolate the structural and psychological drivers behind intra-gender workplace exploitation, analyzing how internalized patriarchy, identity threats, and professional insecurities manifest in female-to-female bullying.
- **Objective 02:** To document and categorize the specific behavioral patterns of relational aggression, detailing how passive-aggressive manipulation, micro-management, and credit exploitation operate within office hierarchies.
- **Objective 03:** To evaluate the multi-tiered impact of unmitigated intra-gender exploitation on the psychological health, career trajectories, and retention rates of targeted female employees.
- **Objective 04:** To formulate actionable, system-wide interventions that foster authentic sisterhood and psychological safety, replacing toxic zero-sum dynamics with transparent equity frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows a qualitative and analytical design, evaluating existing organizational data and theoretical literature to construct an explanatory model for intra-gender workplace friction.

Data Sources

- **Secondary Sources:** The primary data consists of extensive literature reviews drawn from international organizational journals, psychological reports, sociological texts, and previous empirical research on workplace bullying. Key source pools include data from the *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*, and longitudinal studies in behavioral psychology.
- **Primary Sources (Contextual Validation):** To ground the theoretical frameworks, qualitative insights were verified against a series of exploratory, unstructured interviews with female professionals across corporate, government, and academic sectors, capturing lived experiences of relational aggression and vertical gatekeeping.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this investigation encompasses diverse professional ecosystems where hierarchical power structures intersect with high-stakes professional competition. This includes:

- **Competitive Corporate Sectors:** FinTech, technology, engineering, and consulting firms where leadership opportunities remain historically bottlenecked.

- **Government & Public Sector Units:** Highly bureaucratized settings where rigid power asymmetries amplify structural gatekeeping.
- **Academic Institutions:** Departments where prestige, tenure tracks, and funding allocations introduce lateral and vertical friction among female faculty and research scholars.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND STRUCTURAL DRIVERS

Systemic and Organizational Catalyst Factors

Structural Scarcity Mindset

A primary driver of intra-gender exploitation is the artificial limitation of opportunities for women at executive levels. Data from the *Harvard Business Review* and *Forbes* indicates that despite progressive diversity hiring initiatives at entry levels, the executive suite remains dominated by male cohorts. This creates an institutional bottleneck.

When women perceive that an organization allocates only one or two "token" seats for female leadership, the psychological climate shifts from collaboration to intense competition. This **structural scarcity mindset** forces female peers to view each other as direct threats to their personal corporate survival. A peer's success is no longer celebrated as a collective victory for gender representation; instead, it is parsed as a reduction in the remaining available slots for promotion, driving defensive political maneuvers and relational sabotage.

Internalized Systemic Inequities

Sociological frameworks popularized by Kate Millett clarify how marginalized individuals adopt the behavioral scripts of their oppressors to survive within patriarchal systems. When a corporate culture rewards aggressive, hyper-competitive, and exclusionary behavior, women who mimic these traits are often the ones who achieve upward mobility.

This internalization means that female leaders may apply a harsher double standard to their female subordinates. They may justify their severity by reasoning, *"I had to endure a toxic, unsupportive environment to get here, so the next generation must prove their worth through the same trial by fire."* This cycles oppression through generations, turning an institutional survival mechanism into a self-perpetuating pattern of exploitation.

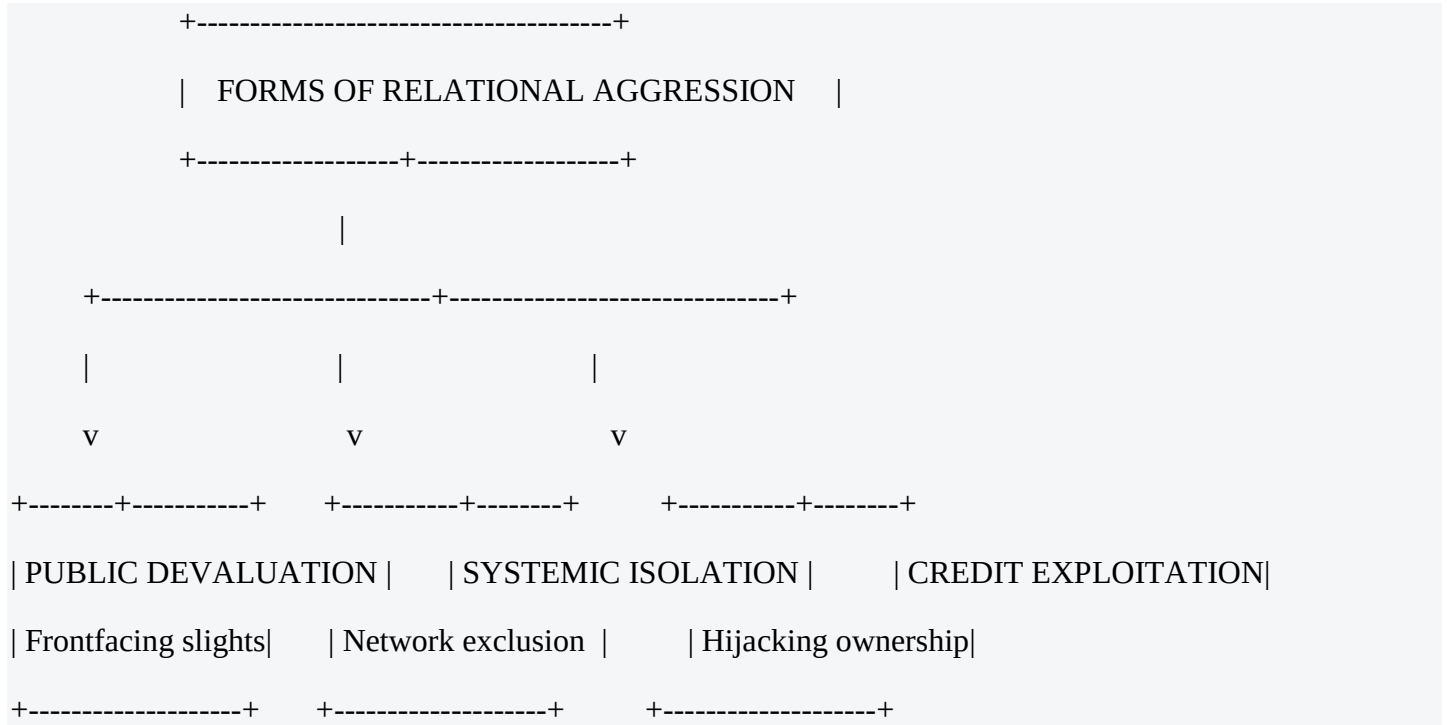
Organizational Culture and Leadership Pathology

Empirical work by Derks, Ellemers, et al. (2011) emphasizes that toxic organizational climates directly cultivate Queen Bee behaviors. Authoritarian and *laissez-faire* leadership frameworks are strongly correlated with high rates of workplace bullying.

When senior management evaluates performance solely through aggressive individual metrics while neglecting psychological safety, collaborative mentorship is devalued. Female executives operating under these parameters learn that protecting their team or mentoring junior women offers no political return, prompting them to conform to a culture that privileges individual self-preservation over group solidarity.

Manifest Forms of Workplace Exploitation

Unlike inter-gender harassment, which often manifests through overt displays of authority or sexual misconduct, intra-gender exploitation frequently utilizes **relational and indirect aggression**. These behaviors are designed to damage an individual's professional standing and psychological equilibrium while offering the perpetrator plausible deniability.



Public Devaluation

This tactic involves systematically chipping away at a colleague's professional credibility in front of peers, clients, or superiors. It rarely takes the form of explosive arguments; instead, it utilizes micro-slights, highly critical questioning during presentations, or backhanded compliments regarding a target's capabilities. By highlighting minor mistakes in public forums, the exploiting actor frames their aggression as "quality control" or "constructive feedback," masking an intent to damage the target's confidence and standing.

Reputational Subversion

Reputational subversion relies on the quiet dissemination of unverified rumors regarding a colleague's personal life, credentials, or character. In corporate landscapes, this can manifest as whispering campaigns that question how a junior woman secured a promotion, or subtly implying she lacks emotional stability for high-stress assignments. Because these narratives spread through informal communication channels, the victim is left unable to defend themselves against a hidden blemish on their professional reputation.

Systemic Isolation

Isolation is the deliberate exclusion of a female professional from vital networks, strategic project groups, or casual social circles where essential organizational knowledge is shared. A female manager might hold spontaneous strategy alignments without inviting a specific female team member, or withhold critical feedback until after a deadline has passed. This systematic gatekeeping ensures the target operates with a lack of information, leading to artificial mistakes that stunt their visibility and career progression.

Professional Credit Exploitation

This form of exploitation occurs when a senior female professional uses her hierarchical position to appropriate the intellectual capital of her junior female subordinates. Innovative concepts, comprehensive data models, or successful project executions are presented to higher executives under the manager's name, while the actual creator is relegated to a minor footnote. This behavior exploits the structural reality that junior employees lack the institutional channels to claim ownership without appearing insubordinate.

Socio-Organizational and Psychological Framework

The Interplay of Organizational and Intersectional Lenses

To understand the frequency and severity of workplace friction, individual psychology must be mapped against intersecting demographic and institutional vectors:

- **Workplace Hierarchy and Professional Status:** Power asymmetries dictate the direction and style of exploitation. Junior employees are uniquely vulnerable to gatekeeping, while mid-career professionals often experience lateral friction driven by aggressive professional competition.
- **The Intersectional Matrix (Age and Culture):** Experiences of bullying are heavily contingent on age and cultural background. Generational divides can create conflicting expectations regarding workplace loyalty and communication styles. Additionally, diverse cultural backgrounds influence how individuals perceive authority, process workplace microaggressions, and seek redress.

Organizational Layer	Primary Vector of Conflict	Common Behavioral Manifestation	Structural Driver
Senior Executive	Vertical Downward	Strategic Gatekeeping, Public Devaluation	Identity Preservation, Assimilation
Mid-Career Management	Lateral / Horizontal	Reputational Subversion, Information Withholding	Structural Scarcity, Promotion Bottlenecks
Junior / Entry Level	Vertical Upward (Target)	Psychological Attrition, Credit Exploitation	Low Institutional Power, Dependence

Contextualizing Severe Behavioral Deviations

In extreme instances, toxic workplace behaviors escalate to severe psychological manipulation. However, academic rigor demands caution: terms must be contextualized within organizational pathology rather than labeling individuals without formal clinical evidence.

Everyday Sadism and Systemic Validation

Psychological studies (such as Buckels et al., 2013) identify a behavioral profile known as the "everyday sadist"—an individual who derives gratification from asserting dominance and witnessing the distress of others. In a healthy corporate environment, these toxic traits are quickly identified and corrected.

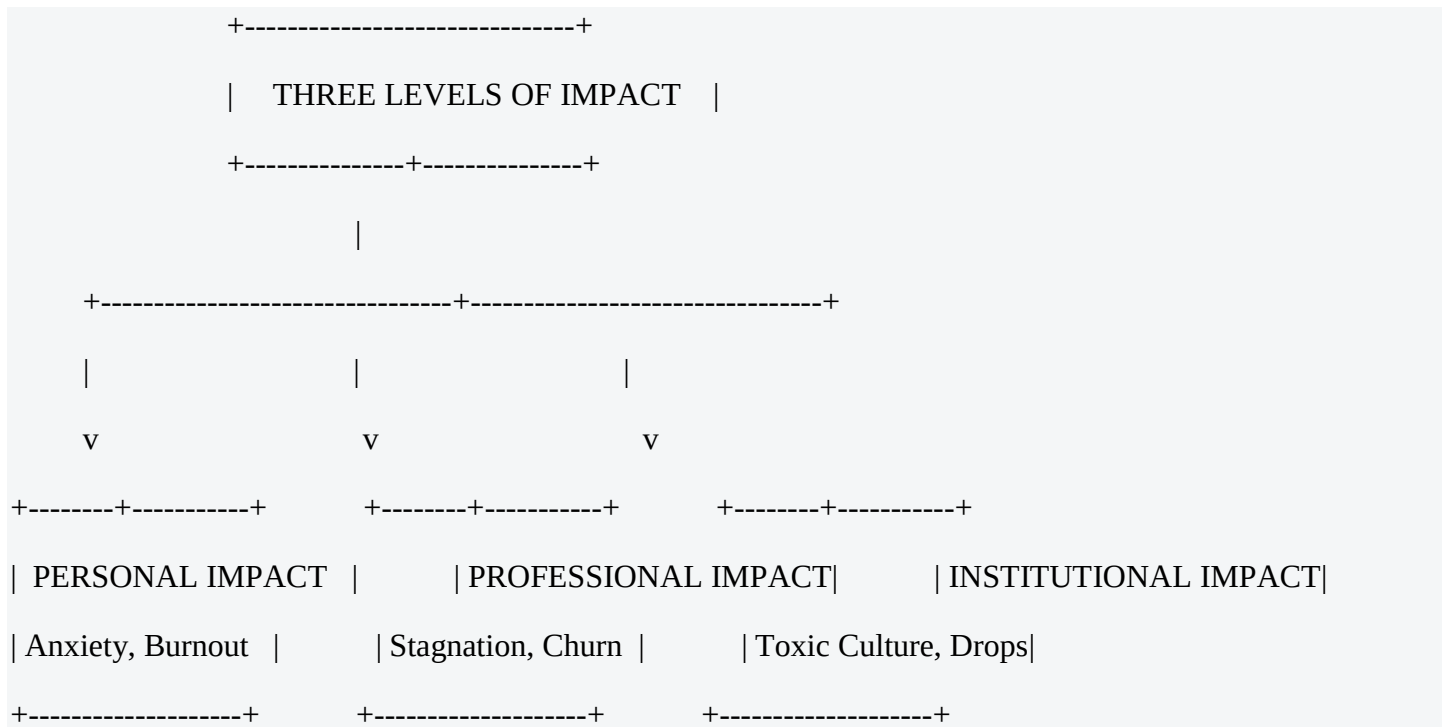
However, a dysfunctional organizational structure can inadvertently validate and protect these actors. If a manager delivers strong financial numbers or hits tight deadlines, senior leadership often overlooks their toxic interpersonal behavior. This systemic tolerance signals to the bad actor that their abusive practices are acceptable methods for driving performance.

The Role of the Corporate "Lobby"

Toxic actors rarely operate effectively in isolation; they build internal coalitions, often referred to as a corporate "lobby." By leveraging structural weaknesses in Human Resources and exploiting the insecurities of peer colleagues, a toxic manager creates a loyal inner circle. This group insulates the bad actor from accountability by corroborating their narratives, reframing continuous psychological harassment as "standard performance management" or "demanding leadership." This systemic alignment erodes trust throughout the broader institution.

Institutional and Personal Consequences

The damage caused by unmitigated intra-gender relational aggression extends far beyond individual conflict, causing measurable harm across three distinct levels:



Personal Impact

- **Psychological Distress:** Targets of intra-gender bullying exhibit high rates of clinical anxiety, severe depression, and a loss of professional self-confidence. The unexpected nature of aggression from a female peer or leader can deepen feelings of isolation.
- **Somatic Erosion:** Chronic exposure to psychological harassment triggers sustained cortisol production. This can manifest physically as chronic fatigue, sleep disturbances, migraines, and gastrointestinal complications, frequently requiring extended medical leave.

Professional Impact

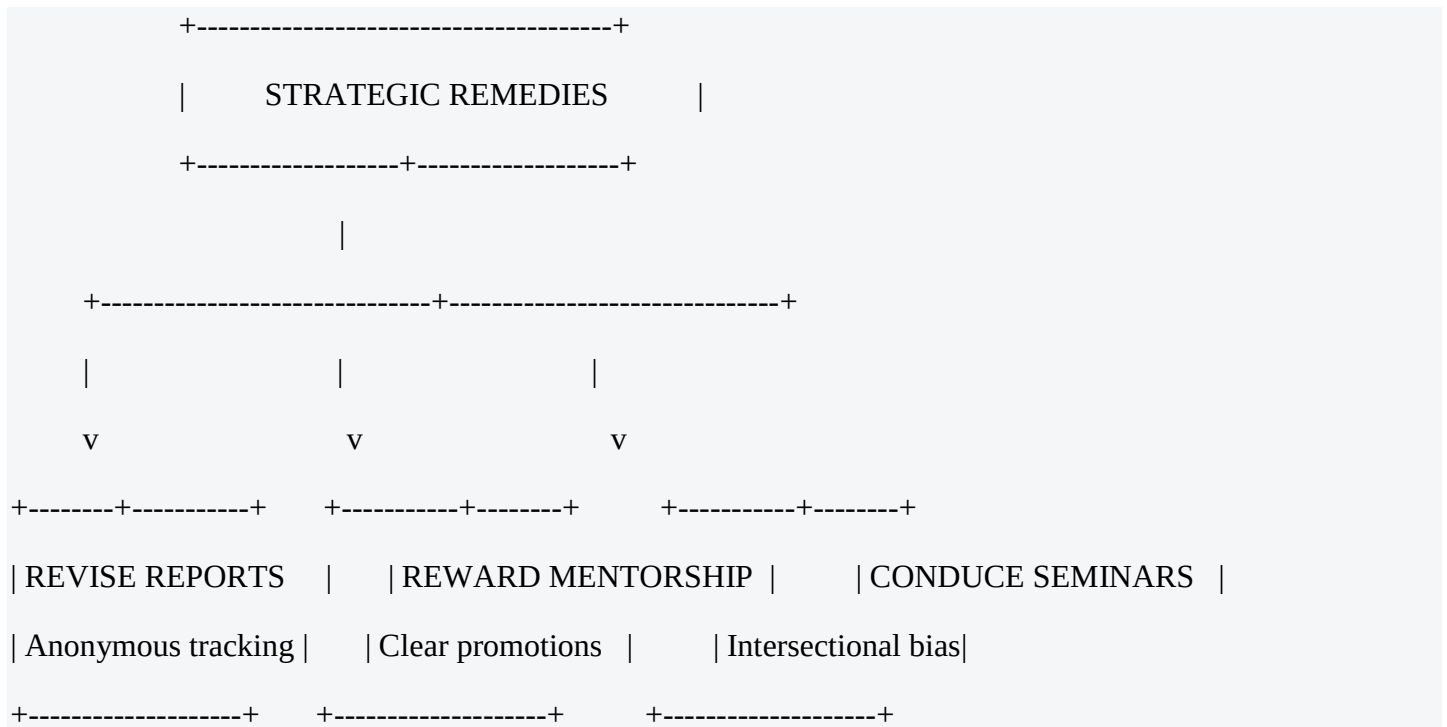
- **Artificial Career Stagnation:** Because perpetrators often control performance evaluations and project assignments, targeted individuals are routinely passed over for promotions, leaving high-potential female talent stuck in junior positions.
- **Aggressive Attrition:** When employees realize that internal reporting mechanisms fail to protect them, they choose voluntary resignation. The organization systematically loses valuable female talent, undermining its own long-term diversity initiatives.

Institutional Impact

- **Cultural Decay:** The normalization of relational aggression degrades the overall office environment. It replaces psychological safety with a climate of fear, suspicion, and defensive positioning.
- **Operational Disruption:** Teams characterized by internal friction experience communication breakdowns, low collaborative risk-taking, and a drop in overall productivity, which directly harms the organization's bottom line.

Systemic Remedies and Strategic Solutions

Addressing intra-gender workplace exploitation requires moving beyond basic interpersonal counseling toward comprehensive structural reforms. [3]



Comprehensive Workplace Policy Review

Traditional anti-harassment policies are often ill-equipped to handle indirect, relational aggression. Organizations must establish reporting channels designed to track and document subtle patterns of gaslighting, professional isolation, and credit theft. These reporting systems should route investigations through objective, neutral parties to bypass internal corporate lobbies and ensure true organizational justice.

Structural Mentorship and Equity Frameworks

To dismantle the structural scarcity mindset, institutions must ensure transparency in promotions and career progression. Leadership development programs should explicitly tie compensation and advancement to a manager's track record of mentoring and supporting junior staff. Rewarding collaborative development removes the incentive for self-group distancing, turning leadership from a defensive post into a collaborative responsibility.

Intersectional Leadership Seminars

Organizations must implement continuous professional development training for managers that addresses intersectional biases, cross-generational communication, and emotional intelligence. These seminars help female leaders recognize how they may inadvertently replicate patriarchal control structures. Teaching managers to build cross-generational partnerships helps convert competitive friction into proactive professional support.

CONCLUSION

The exploitation of women by women in the workplace is not an intrinsic gender conflict; it is a complex socio-organizational ailment. While individual psychological traits dictate the specific execution of bullying, it is the underlying organizational culture, systemic inequities, and artificial structural scarcities that allow these behaviors to take root and flourish.

True structural equity cannot be achieved by legal mandates alone or by focusing narrowly on interpersonal disputes. It demands a holistic re-evaluation of institutional power dynamics, corporate reward systems, and intersectional variables. By shifting corporate cultures from an environment of zero-sum competition to one rooted in psychological safety, transparency, and authentic professional support, organizations can build a workplace where women safely empower other women.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Buckels, E. E., Jones, D. N., & Paulhus, D. L. (2013). Behavioral confirmation of everyday sadism. *Psychological Science*, 24(11), 2201-2209.
2. Derks, B., Ellemers, N., van Laar, C., & de Groot, K. (2011). Do sexist organizational cultures create the Queen Bee? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(3), 519-535.
3. Derks, B., Van Laar, C., & Ellemers, N. (2016). The queen bee phenomenon: Why women leaders distance themselves from junior women. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(3), 456-469.
4. Ellemers, N., van den Heuvel, H., de Gilder, D., Maass, A., & Bonvini, A. (2004). The underrepresentation of women in science: Differential commitment or the Queen Bee syndrome? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(3), 315-338.
5. Horney, K. (1937). *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*. W. W. Norton & Company.
6. Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual Politics*. Doubleday.
7. Staines, G., Jayaratne, T., & Tavis, C. (1974). The queen bee syndrome. *Psychology Today*, 7(8), 55-60.
8. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Conflict*, 33(47), 74.