

# Video Transcript Beth Livingston Gender Norms

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By Beth Livingston, Ph.D.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 00:13

As a gender researcher, it is clear when I look around me, whether I'm raising my children or teaching my students or consulting with companies, that gender norms are alive and well and are all around us, particularly at work. It may start in childhood with silly things like slogans on baby onesies or statements about boys being boys. But that turns into things like the nursing profession. We have male nurses and nurses. Or in leadership, we have CEOs and female CEOs. This reflects the fact that when things happen that are contrary to these gendered expectations that we think should happen or will happen, we notice and we call them out, whether intentionally or not.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 01:02

Traditional gender role expectations encompass many things. But in particular, I like to talk about the ways in which they prescribe particular expectations. For instance, for women that the ideal or the average woman is submissive and cooperative and family-oriented and nurturing, whereas the more traditional expectations for men are that they are dominant, competitive, work-oriented, aggressive. We know, though, that in actuality men and women vary along those traits and a continuum, that there is no way to say that these specific traits are a one or a zero just for men or just for women.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 01:47

Traditional gender norms take these averages that describe a population of people and use them to prescribe or expect particular behaviors for individual people. And after all, just as we wouldn't say, well, on average, women are shorter than men, therefore, every woman will be shorter than every man. When we do this with actual gendered expectations for particular behaviors or traits that people have, we end up getting people in the wrong places. We force men perhaps into competitive roles that they may not like, and we force women into nurturing roles that they may not like.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 02:31

While traditional gender norms prescribe certain behaviors, make us expect certain behaviors, they also proscribe other behaviors, making them not ideal, right? We don't recommend those certain things. Certain behaviors are seen as appropriate for men and for women, and certain things are seen as inappropriate for men and for women. So it's not enough that women perhaps are expected to be more nurturing and more cooperative and more social, it's that they're not expected to be aggressive, assertive, or dominant. That is, if they act in the sort of competitive or aggressive ways, they may be subjected to backlash in the workplace.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 03:14

This backlash may be as much as social sort of backlash where they're not invited to certain events, or they're talked about behind their back, or it can result in lost jobs, or lost income or a lack of promotions. We know that this happens a lot in organizations and usually from people who are fairly well-meaning. There's a lot of research, for instance, on performance evaluations and the types of things that are written in written performance evaluations.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 03:41

Let's take the word abrasive, for instance. This word is almost never used to describe men. And every time it is used to describe women, it's used in a negative way. What happens with these sorts of words is they're used to take women who don't necessarily meet our expectations of gendered norms and call them out in a way that is noticeable. Those types of women often end up not getting the developmental support they need and maybe passed over for promotions in their workplaces. In other words, women who act in ways that flout these sorts of gender norms are at risk for backlash, and we need to be aware of those things to make sure that they don't happen in our workplace.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 04:22

So what can managers do to make sure that these things don't happen? Managers who use more objective criteria that are clearly related to outcomes at work make better decisions and are less likely to fall prey to these sorts of gendered norms at work. We try to use more standardized feedback feedback that focuses focuses us on constructive developmental feedback and eliminates or reduces our ability to editorialize about norms and behaviors that people are engaging in at work. This will help us to reduce the sort of backlash against both men and women who defy our gendered expectations, and being proactive about this is important because it helps us it helps us to combat these sort of systemic inequities that we see happening in organizations that keep women from succeeding at work.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 05:10

Things like the glass ceiling or glass walls or the glass escalator, the glass ceiling being women who are relegated to more lower levels of leadership in organizations. They can see those top levels, but they're not seen as leader material. Glass walls, where women are more likely to be in the sort of supportive positions rather than line positions or decision-making positions. You may see this in your own organization, where women are more likely to be in these supportive roles in administration or in HR, for instance, and are less likely to be in line positions that will then put them into greater career paths towards higher levels of leadership. Glass escalators refer to the fact that men who are in traditionally feminine or female organizations or occupations tend to get skyrocketed right up to those leadership positions in those organizations. Because we have these gendered norms about leaders that correspond with male gender norms being more dominant, more aggressive, more work-oriented.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 06:15

What's the result of the systemic barriers that are rooted in gender norms? What that means is that we don't get men and women in the right roles in the organizations. We don't get people who are right for their jobs.

**Beth Livingston, Ph.D.** 06:28

Overall, gender norms are everywhere. They're in our childhood. They're in our workplace. They're in the media that we consume. And sometimes they do describe behaviors that seem to be different on average between men and between women. But when we use those norms to make decisions at work, we risk making the wrong decisions and we risk getting the wrong people in the wrong jobs. And so we need to be aware that these gender norms can affect our decision-making so we can prevent that from happening.