

Female rivalry at work: Case of Moroccan executives in the industrial sector

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ABSTRACT

As part of a doctoral research on professional equality between women and men, we carried out a qualitative study with the aim of making Moroccan female executives talk about their working conditions in the private industrial environment. The question of interpersonal relationships at work was thus addressed; the eighteen women interviewed were invited to reveal their preference as to the gender of their superiors, colleagues and collaborators. The results were surprising: the majority (67%) of respondents say they prefer to work with and for men and only 16% of respondents support their female peers.

Given the sexism that characterizes the workplace, especially the industrial one, this result seems to be illogical since we expect female solidarity to face gender discrimination at work.

At work, is the woman really the enemy of the woman? How conflicts between women manifest themselves? What are the causes? How can we limit female rivalry at work? It is to these questions that we will try to answer throughout this article.

Key words: *Female rivalries, Moroccan female executives, Moroccan industrial sector.*

1. FEMALE RIVALRY AT WORK: MYTH OR REALITY?

First, it is important to understand the meaning of the concept “rivalry at work”. Susan Shapiro Barash (2006) answers the following question: “In competition, you are aware of your value and you measure your skills and strengths against those of the other, male or female. Rivalry is based not on strength, but on the fear of being supplanted by the other woman, whether in love or professional matters. It is ambiguous, all the more devious because it is unconscious. We can then, following this distinction, associate rivalry with negative actions and unhealthy competition.

We often read in the popular press about the existence of female rivalries at work. It is in the professional environment where this aspect of HR is most evident, which remains very little studied here as elsewhere. We prefer denouncing the innumerable violence against women from one end of the planet to the other rather than speaking of the cruelty among women.

Nearly 88% of women say they prefer to work for men in business! This is the result of an online survey conducted in 2003 by monster.fr, a site specializing in human resources, among 724 women. In the absence of such figures in the Moroccan context, we will try to analyze the situation through the testimonies of working women.

It should be noted that in Morocco female professional relations are recent. Especially in the industrial environment. Women are much more present in clothing, agriculture, banks, etc.

To our knowledge, although several studies and reports deal with the situation of women in the workplace, absent are the studies devoted to professional female rivalry.

The significant insertion of women in the industrial sector represents a marked transformation, causing changes and therefore upheavals. It would therefore be necessary to analyze professional relations in order to accompany this change and try to understand behaviors.

Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster (2012), state that “women are complicated. While most of us want to be kind and caring, we struggle with our darker side - feelings of jealousy, envy, and competition. While men tend to compete in an open manner – vying for position and vying to be crowned “winners” – women often compete more covertly and behind the scenes. This covert competition and indirect aggression are at the heart of the mean behavior of women in the workplace”.

Author Susan Shapiro Barash (2006), sustains that “Much of it is secret. It's our dirty little secret that we're really jealous and competitive with other women.

“In the world of work, women come into conflict much more often with other women than with men or with each other” assert Pat Heim and Susan Murphy (2004), two American management consultants in large companies.

This finding was proven in our study. The women we met said that most of the conflicts within the company come from women:

“If you want to analyze the problems in the company, you draw a table containing the causes and the stakeholders. You will undoubtedly find at least one woman. Either woman-woman, or woman-man, but almost never man-man”. Bouchra, Planning Engineer.

According to Ariane Ollier-Malaterre, professor of management at the University of Quebec in Montreal “Conflicts between women are more visible, because they go against the social norm. A woman is expected to be consensual, turned towards the other, more sensitive. We accept aggression or conflict from men, but that's not the idea we have of a woman”.

At the office, when the machine gets carried away between women, they don't give each other gifts!

Indeed, between opposite sex the modesty fixes the red lines. And even in cases of harassment, there is a greater tendency to report violence against women than violence done by women. Indeed, sometimes, the negative comments made by

women among themselves are exceeding, by far, those of male thought considered as machist. Many women go so far as to legitimize verbal or physical violence.

“I had to manage a rather bizarre case of harassment where the harasser and the victim were women; a collaborator with her manager. They exchanged, by telephone, photos and insults on physical aspects. We had to take disciplinary actions”. Says an HR manager who participated in our study.

In the workplace, and unlike men, a woman seeks to establish interpersonal relationships. She needs it! When she notices that others, especially her peers, are indifferent to these relationships and are just focused on achieving professional goals, she feels upset and disappointed. An internal imbalance occurs and therefore turns into aggressive acts.

Women expect their female colleagues to be more understanding, aware and sensitive to their needs. And, when this does not happen, they can react in an antagonistic way. These are, for women, internalized stereotypes of how to behave.

In order to appreciate the professional relationships between women, we have, during this research, let the women talk about their interpersonal relationships in the professional sphere.

What, then, are the manifestations, causes and effects of female rivalry at work and how could this phenomenon be limited? In this article, we will try to provide some answers to these questions.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

As part of a doctoral work on the theme of professional gender equality (Afilal, 2019), we conducted a qualitative study with female managers in the industrial sector. The variable interpersonal relationships at work was addressed. And when we asked women we met about how they perceive their relationships with women at work, the result was a wave of stories and emotions.

We contacted and invited individually and directly eighteen women executives to participate in our study. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed a semantic saturation of the data and, added to the variety of profiles interviewed, the theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 2010) was achieved.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants who work in four private industrial multinationals based in Tangier. Three of these multinationals operate in the automotive sector and one in the aeronautics one.

The use of this sampling reinforces the validity of our results, since it is based on the principle of successive replications: if a result is obtained in one context and if it is verified in another context, different but comparable, its validity is greater (it draws explanatory robustness from it) (Yin, 1993). However, the generalization of the results has not been sought here.

The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed in a typewritten manner and encrypted with fictitious first names to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents.

The process of corpus content analysis has been characterized by an analytical progression and an evolutionary approach (Huberman and Miles, 2003). The first steps are used to organize the data collected iteratively, by codification, grouping and categorization.

In addition to manual coding, we resorted to automated coding through the use of NVivo Pro 11¹ software. The hierarchy of codes and themes in the nodes created on the software allowed us to clearly visualize the phrases coded in the source texts. This IT solution thus helped us to easily select verbatim to illustrate the analysis of the results obtained. Moreover, while qualitative analysis software facilitates storage and links, processing remains the responsibility of the researcher.

¹ N'vivo is a software developed by QSR international for the analysis of qualitative and combined data.

Using the tools of chronological sequence analysis² (Huberman & Miles, 2003), we indicated the key events in the interviews and organized them into blocks of sequences in a matrix. The operation consists in determining the sequences directly linked to the object of the study, namely the professional woman-woman relationship. After having organized the sequences into blocks, we proceeded to a comparative analysis between cases and between sites.

Finally, the intermediate and regular meetings with the members of our research laboratory helped us to share our thoughts on the constraints and difficulties encountered when defining the themes. These discussions allowed us to properly regulate the evolution of codification and recoding until their stabilization.

3. DETERMINANTS OF FEMALE RIVALRY AT WORK

In reality, there are a thousand and one ways to justify the existence of female rivalry in business. According to the perceptions of women interviewed, there are many reasons for their hate to collaborate with female colleagues and bosses. We will try to provide explanations to each situation experienced. However, it should be noted that, according to the declarations of the respondents, it is essentially the women's character that are the main cause of female professional conflicts. Citing jealousy, sensitivity and curiosity as examples.

According to the testimonies, the perception of the other is different depending on the position in the organization. Two cases are to be analyzed: the horizontal relations and the vertical ones.

In the first case, where the relations are horizontal, we feel a certain form of professional rivalry. In the second case, it is rather a feeling of envy.

“We recently appointed a young woman as a Marketing Director, female and male employees did not appreciate this and they criticized her appointment. They say: In addition of being a woman, she's young! I say that she is a hardworking woman, communicating very well and will be of great added value for the management committee. These women are playing against their gender! And it is often out of jealousy: why her and not me!”. Sirine, IT Services Coordinator.

Women may internalize patriarchal messages that women are not as strong, competent and capable as men. This is called internalized sexism.

The psychologist Annik Houel (2014) had the opportunity to study the subject and wrote a book about it: Female rivalries at work. For her, these rivalries are only a reproduction of what happens within the family. Relationships with a female boss follow the pattern of the relationship that the employee had with her mother. We will seek her love while rejecting her authority, as during the crisis of adolescence. “And the chief can very well use this register to mother and establish her power. Explains Annik Houel.

“The manager of our direction has a very good memory and tries to be always aware of the personal concerns of the members of her team. She always invites us to consider her as our mother or older sister”. Sirine, IT Services Coordinator.

From employee to employee, we would rather replay the sister-sister partition, these enemy friends. Adds the author.

“The woman, unlike the man, can bring the sentimental and the personal into her decisions. She could contradict you because you are simply wearing more beautiful shoes than hers (laughs)” Douae, Purchasing Manager.

² Chronological sequence analysis is used to visualize time sequences in chronological order. Because the events we are interested in take place over a more or less long period of time (Huberman and Miles, 2003).

For some respondents, a woman is curious by nature. She is not satisfied with the general and seeks to know the details of things. This could be inconvenient and sometimes embarrassing for her collaborators.

“For the hierarchy, I think having a male superior is better than a female, especially when dealing with personal matters. If you want for example to have a leave of absence, a woman will ask you the question why? She is more curious than the man”. Hind, Quality Assurance Manager.

Finding it difficult to properly control their emotions, women often have ulterior motives. It would then be necessary to think carefully about your words and actions before addressing a woman so as not to feel provoked. The woman has a long memory; we are never safe from being misunderstood.

“I prefer to collaborate with men. I collaborated with a woman who was my work partner during the last project and we had a lot of misunderstandings. When I spoke to her with a good intention she believed that I provoked her. Now during breaks I spend my time with my male colleagues to escape misunderstandings and irrelevant talk”. Lamiae, Product Engineer.

For some, it is very difficult to continuously weigh one's words and actions; one does not feel natural and spontaneous. This is what would make women say that working with a female boss or colleague is “more stressful”.

“I am the only woman in my work team. Frankly, I wish to remain the only one! I feel very comfortable with my colleagues. I've never had a problem with them. I feel more natural with my male colleagues. It might sound weird, but that's how it is!”. Salma, Head of Treasurer and Sales Administration.

“During my studies I preferred to work with men, they are more transparent. Women are of a different character. For example the man does not pay attention to certain details, he has no ulterior motives. The woman can get angry easily because she is more sensitive”. Jinane, Project leader engineering.

Jealousy has been an inherent trait of female character since the dawn of time.

It is at the heart of the legends and fairy tales that nourish the universal imagination that the most primordial stories of rivalry are nestled: Cinderella, harassed by her stepsisters, and especially Snow White, murdered by her stepmother who can't bear to be supplanted by a woman more beautiful than her. All the little girls in the world have grown up with these stories in their heads.

Some women unfortunately cannot hide this harmful side of their personality. It happens to allow oneself to provoke directly or to commit acts of gratuitous wickedness towards a person.

“The woman is often arrogant. She wants to be better than you. I'll give you the example of a woman, with whom I have no personal or professional relationship, who came, suddenly one day telling me: You're exaggerating! Where do you bring all these clothes from? You wear a new outfit every day... It's too much!”. Zineb, Project Pilot Engineer.

Jealousy is a feeling that comes in three distinct forms. Possessive jealousy is the type of jealousy where the goal is to keep what you have at all costs. A work position could for example be the subject of an obsession for the individual who owns it. Envious jealousy is the second type of jealousy where one desires what others have. It's the state of mind where you don't necessarily want to surpass others, you just want to take their place, have exactly what they have, and be what they are. Competitive jealousy is the desire to be above others, and to prove the fact that one is better than everyone. The idea that a person can surpass us makes us sick.

Another factor that could create tension in female relationships is the non-sharing of information. A category of women, symbolized by “chameleons” (K. Afilal, A. Maghni, 2017) is characterized by the ability of collecting and processing information. They are socially intelligent and practice social fluttering by moving from a group to another while easily creating a place in it. However, when they feel insecure, the monopolization of information represents for them a weapon to keep power.

“There are people with whom things are going extremely well and there are people with whom things are not going well at all! Women who block you just to block you. They may not share information just because they believe that having the information is power”. Yasmine, Personnel Administration Manager.

Many women adopt the cliché that at work, women are much less collaborative than men.

“I prefer to collaborate with men because they are more helpful. Men give more than women. Women can hide information but men cannot”. Aya, HR and Payroll Manager.

“I find that a man at work is helpful and hardworking. They work well with each other. On the other hand, women are lazy and do not cooperate”. Farah, Supplier Accounting Manager.

Thus, the interviews revealed that the marital and parental status of the woman affect her relations with the peers. A single woman seems tougher, insensitive and careless of others and their needs. She is not understanding and does not empathize.

We can guess how hard it would be to ask for marriage leave or announce your pregnancy to a single chef! “She may die on the spot or lose her consciousness! I’m telling you experiences I had here”. Said Bouchra, Planning Engineer, and continued:

“... Unmarried women contradict every other married woman. I am part of the company and I live with women like this. You wait impatiently for her to be married to calm down. Between us women, we say that she is a tough woman. She must get married to become a little tenderer... She would learn to excuse a mother who has a sick child, she would no longer say (come to work even if your child is sick). But how even there is the human side in her that should be awakened!”.

“A Woman is the real enemy of a woman”, this is how Sirine, IT Services Coordinator, starts recounting her recent bad experience when an HR manager who told her during a job interview: “We hesitated a lot to contact you since you are married and have children”. According to her, the position requires travel. Our interviewee assured her that she is aware of this and that she assumes it. Unfortunately, they did not give her any feedback. She continues: “I felt discrimination coming from a woman. I think it's better to have a job interview with a man because he would be, I think, more understanding”.

Without having to accuse other women, some testimonies admit to preferring to collaborate with men. Because they have always gotten along well with them and appreciate their character. It is their attraction to the other sex that is the main reason for this.

This attraction started at a young age. These women, for example, preferred to revise and prepare for lessons with their male classmates.

"I don't have any problems with my female colleagues. Except that I, in fact, prefer to collaborate with men. That's my nature! I am much more comfortable with men than with women. I get on much better with men". Salwa, Quality Engineer.

This category of women prefers discussions led by men, their interests, their way of thinking...etc. Salwa says:

“Because I don't like the kind of discussions you could have with women. It's not a stereotype but I say that sometimes women discuss anything! And this, in fact, does not tempt me at all! Especially when they are gossiping or talking about trivialities...”.

4. DISCUSSION

In conducting research for our article, we found no scientific empirical studies proving that women consistently behave more as rivals than men. But the feeling is anchored in the majority of us. It is therefore important to be aware of this and to distinguish between the stereotype and the reality.

It is true that our results confirm that female rivalry at work is stronger than male rivalry. However, the best psychological research reveals that gender has little or no impact on personality and leadership (Nieva and Gutek, 1981, Eagly and Johnson, 1990, Kolb, 1999, Liziane Minkoue Pira, 2018).

Nevertheless, we must admit a reality. In personality psychology, locus of control (Julian Rotter, 1954) refers to the extent to which individuals believe they can control events that affect them. A person's "locus" (Latin for "place" or "location") can be either internal (the person believes he can control his life) or external (meaning the person believes his decisions and his life are controlled by environmental factors he cannot influence, either by chance or fate).

Research confirms that women are more likely to have an external locus of control. Personality can dictate how sensitive they are to outside factors that influence their accomplishments.

In the case of a woman lacking confidence in herself, her abilities and skills, she considers everyone as a potential threat, especially other women in a workplace not offering enough opportunities for advancement.

And this latter is precisely what triggers female rivalry at its worst! According to most researchers in this field.

"One seat at the table"

Admittedly, female rivalry is fueled by a work culture that discriminates against women. The workplace does not provide a level playing field for women, equal opportunities to rise to high positions. Women are forced to compete with each other as they adopt the idea of the shortage of places at the table, in teams, in the room, etc.

This makes the game painful for women with a more external locus of control who lack confidence in their abilities.

According to Mikaela Kiner (2020), one of the main drivers of female rivalry is the "one seat at the table" concept. This concept comes from the conviction that diversity is obligatory, but not useful. However, there is plenty of evidence that diverse teams perform better, are more innovative, generate more revenue and have higher profits.

It is internalized sexism, which we cited earlier, that causes women to subconsciously absorb beliefs that manifest themselves in the way they judge each other. Some women abuse, underestimate and distance themselves from other women in order to increase their power and position among men.

For some observers, this reflection applies especially in professional circles traditionally dominated by men: this is the "queen bee syndrome". The expression was found by researchers at the University of Michigan in the 1970s. In their study, they describe this syndrome as the attitude of certain women who, having succeeded in these masculine sectors, oppose the promotion of their female colleagues in lower positions. According to the academics, this reaction is largely linked to the fact that the patriarchal culture in the workplace has encouraged them to become obsessed with their authority, by a kind of mimicry aligned with "masculine" codes of behavior.

Moreover, successful leadership has long been defined by men. With few female role models, professional women imitated men in order to gain acceptance and progress.

"I am a woman, and if I have to recruit profiles, I would not recruit any woman in my team. It's because of certain acts of women that make you hate work. They are very resistant to change. It is rare where you find a professional and rigorous woman, because women already present their gender as a reason of their negligence and lightness. We say: "Excuse me, I am only a woman, I do not keep my word!". Bouchra, Planning Engineer.

Gendered workplaces

Workplaces are gendered when they are led and dominated by men and managed according to masculine norms, values and expectations. In such workplaces, two powerful biases can drive women into antagonistic relationships: affinity bias and gender bias (Andrea S. Kramer, Alton B. Harris, 2020)

Affinity bias is the natural, instinctual preference that people should associate with and support people who are like them. Due to affinity bias, male managers typically consider giving women career-enriching assignments, appointing them to important teams, or including them in their networks only after considering men with whom they feel more comfortable.

Gender bias is the assumption that men are superior to women in leadership, withstanding pressure, and in difficult negotiations. Due to gender bias, women are seen as less competent, ambitious and competitive than men.

Affinity and sexist prejudices make working relationships between women difficult because, on the one hand, they limit the number of positions for women at the management tables, on the other hand, women adopt a male management style in order to identify with the male group and distance or differentiate themselves from their female peers. These biases can ultimately foster antagonism between women, which is then often mistakenly attributed to their inherent nature, rather than to workplace circumstances.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the results of our exploration, female rivalry at work, far from being a myth, is a very present reality in our society. Its causes are multiple, but it does not remain without remedy. Two solutions seem relevant to us: taking care of self-esteem and showing solidarity.

Boost self-confidence

On an individual level, the woman must boost her self-confidence in her abilities and skills. She must consider these as the first guarantor of her professional success. She also needs to be aware of the fact that her brilliance is above all not consequent to the extinct of her congeners.

To stop considering any other woman as a potential enemy, Bénédicte Haubold (2010) advocates a single solution: boost your self-esteem. "I plead for the rehabilitation of narcissism. You have to be able to love yourself enough, know what you are worth without needing anyone's approval to be serene and at peace with yourself. It is by loving oneself that one also leaves place for the other.

"Conflicts arise when there is an imbalance in self-esteem and the power of one over the other" observes Louise Doucet (2006), when she interviewed 600 women. Women who feel threatened will use indirect aggression; they will take power away from the other by discrediting them and will seek support."

Taking care of self-esteem is therefore an important factor in order not to feel threatened by another woman.

A female solidarity to be built

It must be admitted that despite the long struggle of feminism, gender solidarity is lacking in women and that, as Simone de Beauvoir (1949) already noted bitterly in *The Second Sex*: "They live dispersed among men".

It's time for women to stop creating barriers for themselves. If there isn't place for all of them, then space will have to be created by acting as allies rather than reinforcing outdated stereotypes.

In this sense, Annik Houel (2014) reminds women: "To be united above all. To realize that their often unconscious misogyny is actually a submission to the dictates of stereotypes. By thinking of themselves as "not like the others" or by stigmatizing other women for fear of not being considered feminine enough by men, those who have power can find themselves very alone because they do not win the solidarity of men. . All of this deserves reflection, if only to help avoid or overcome certain conflicts".

Instead of creating female rivalries, it would be more useful to arrange workplaces so that women are not systematically disadvantaged in their quest for career advancement.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the situation is not as obscure as it suggests. Indeed, we have noted positive perceptions on the profiles of women who have succeeded in their professional careers. By way of illustration, here are the testimonies of two women executives on the same profile of a women in managerial position representing the only female sitting on the management committee:

“As a Chief Financial Officer, she participates fully in decision-making. A competent lady with technical, managerial and personal skills. She was recently able to even negotiate to have flexible schedules and workload!”. Farah, Supplier Accounting Manager.

“At the level of the management committee, our Chief Financial Officer has really a significant weight in the decisions that are taken by the management. I would not say that she only participates. But she has a weight, she has influence”. Yasmine, Personnel Administration Manager.

From their assessment, it is clear that these two executives look to the CFO as a role model.

Another executive associates her career development with the encouragement and good supervision of her line manager.

“It was my manager who was very decisive in my logistics career. It was my boss who helped me a lot, who supervised me well and then who was also a key in my development”. Faiza, Logistics Manager.

Finally, we will firmly believe that the value of respect is important and forms the basis of all interpersonal relationships. In the professional world, respecting the other means recognizing his/her difference, appreciating what he/she do and why not tell them that.

Like any research, this work has limitations that should be addressed in subsequent studies. Our choice of the industry as a context of the study is due to the masculine image associated with this sector. We made the choice of a single-sector study because favoring a sector reputedly masculine to study the phenomenon of professional equality, as we noted in the introduction, seemed appropriate to us. However, this choice limited the generalizability of the results. An interesting research opportunity would therefore be to replicating our conceptual framework with different sectors and carrying out various activities, to ensure its external validity and to confirm or cross-check the analyses. Other research could also focus on all categories of employees and not just women managers.

In this research, we only interviewed women. We didn't ask the men what they think about the subject. By confronting men and women, we would have oriented ourselves towards a comparative approach even before having fully understood, from the inside, the feelings of women and their differences in perceptions. Future research could proceed on the basis of the announced results to comparisons between men and women in terms of experience related to “gendered” interpersonal relationships.

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