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GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT NEXUS THROUGH THE LENSES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SEN'S CAPACITY THEORIES**Malesele Jim Masenya^{1*}, Aklilu Admassu Asha², Ngoako Johannes Mokoele³**^{1*,2,3} *Department of Development and Management, University of Limpopo, South Africa*E-mail: ^{1*} Malesele.masenya@ul.ac.za (Corresponding author)*Received 15 May 2026; accepted 11 August 2026; published 30 September 2026*

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to examine the nexus between gender discrimination and women's empowerment by focusing on Social Constructionism and Sen's Capability theories, and to develop a framework that illustrates their relationship. Gender is a social construct that distinguishes the functions and roles of men and women. The positions, functions, and roles of men and women determine the distinction. However, the conventional concept of gender roles has resulted in unequal status and decision-making power between men and women. The increasing discrepancies in defining gender roles have intensified women's discrimination. Thus, leading to women's underdevelopment, further exacerbated by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and customary practices which underlie the social construction of discriminatory gender roles. Discrimination against women in various forms has continued to exist in African societies, despite global and regional efforts of the United Nations declaration of 1975–85 as Women's Development Decade and the adoption of the 1979 Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) aimed at ensuring gender equality between men and women. The paper argues that challenging and restructuring social norms by deconstructing gender roles can create more inclusive systems. The paper concludes that although Social Constructionist Theory highlights and shapes societal inequality and advocates for normative change, and Sen's Capacity Theory focuses on the real-world effects of discrimination and stresses the practical expansion of women's freedom and opportunities, both are crucial for addressing social norms and thus targeting capability deprivation.

Keywords: gender; women empowerment; Social Constructionism Theory; Sen's Capacity Theory; policies; development

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1. Introduction

Gender perceptions of women are naturally unequal to those of men, which consequently gave rise to the arbitrary social construction of gender roles between men and women, in which men come first in the scheme of things (Masenya, 2023). Like any other social reality, gender is a culturally constructed phenomenon, relative to the larger context and hence may have varied connotations across societies. While in some cultures gender equality may mean something as basic as equal access to formal education for both sexes, in others it may encompass issues such as equal participation in child-rearing responsibilities and household chores. It is because some societies have reached a point where men are expected to give up their socially sanctioned gender privileges to promote equality, while others are still struggling to ensure women have equal opportunities to men (Dyanty & Mbatha, 2025; Govender & Muringa, 2025). Hence, what people seek when they ask for gender equality is contingent upon the socio-cultural standing of a given society.

In general, the conventional concept of gender roles has resulted in unequal status and decision-making power between men and women. Women are considered inferior to men in the aspects of marriage, property and inheritance rights. Men have greater entitlements in the household and society, and more rights to ownership and control of land, which is a major source and means of economic empowerment (Mudau & Kona, 2025). Subsequently, men dominate the economic sphere and positions of political decision-making. At the same time, women's roles are considered to be on the domestic front, consisting mainly of menial endeavours that do not yield political and economic empowerment. These inequitable gender roles have thus placed men far ahead of women in positions of economic and political power where vital decisions are made and the allocation of resources, material and non-material, is determined.

The increasing discrepancies in gender roles have intensified women's discrimination in many developing countries (Zhang, 2022; Huysamen, 2025). Women's underdevelopment is instigated by traditional beliefs, cultural norms and customary practices which underlie the social construction of discriminatory gender roles. Discrimination against women in various forms persists in African societies (Ebute, 2026).

2. Review of literature

Social Constructionism Theory

According to various scholars, social constructionism has numerous definitions and meanings (Nyarko, 2022). Social constructionism is a framework that proposes that certain ideas about physical reality arise from collaborative consensus rather than from pure observation of that reality. The theory of social constructionism proposes that people collectively develop the meanings, denotations, and connotations of social constructs. Social constructionism has been characterised as a neo-Marxian and a neo-Kantian theory, proposing that it replaces the transcendental subject with a societal concept that is both descriptive and normative. A social construct or construction is the meaning, notion, or connotation placed on an object or event by a society and adopted by that society with respect to how they view or deal with the object or event. The preceding explanations emphasise that social constructionism assumes that reality is constructed by collaborative consensus and is dependent on communal interpretation, as well as how society connects meaning and interpretation based on context.

One of the most well-known theories on why there is discrimination against women is the social constructionist. This theory emphasises that gender is not a biological product, but rather a social construct that society has created and perpetuated, and gender roles, expectations, and standards are shaped by social interactions and cultural practices. This theory contends that gender discrimination occurs when individuals are subjected to unfair or disparate treatment based on their gender, hence limiting their opportunities and access to resources. It emphasises how gender stereotypes and societal norms impact how men and women are treated and given chances in different ways. Generally, the social constructionist provides a framework for understanding and addressing the systemic basis of gender discrimination and emphasises how society affects gender roles and inequities.

The theory of Social Constructionism guides this study. Constructionism is a theory that considers knowledge to be constructed through social interaction and context sensitivity. Constructionism is defined, at a general level, as an approach that holds that reality is socially constructed and reproduced through human interactions. Constructionism connects international theory to long-standing sociological concerns about the social construction of reality. There are different varieties of social constructivism as an epistemological approach. The main divide is between a rationalist, actor-centred approach, which takes a more positivist stance. A reflectivist approach, which takes a more interpretative position, is interested in the role language and discourses play in the construction of reality. Social constructionism places great emphasis on the fact that society constructs its reality; it also accepts that there is an objective reality and is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. Hence, gender is a socially constructed component that reflects a society's views on the appropriate roles of men and women and is shaped by traditional beliefs, cultural norms, and customary practices. Put

differently, these perspectives construct societal rights and entitlements in a form that denies women access to economic and political empowerment, hence women's poverty.

Gender Discrimination and Constructionism

When people are treated unfairly because of their gender, it frequently leads to unequal opportunities, rights, and social standing (Larson, 2019; Khoza, 2021; Donkor, 2022; Biryuk, 2026). This is known as gender discrimination. For example, previously, women in rural areas had limited access to education and health care services.

Gender should be contextualised within social constructivism. According to Nyarko (2020), "the term gender became known in early 1977, when a London feminist group no longer used old issues such as patriarchal or sexist but replaced them with the term gender discourse". Gender is a social construct that distinguishes the functions and roles of men and women. The positions, functions, and roles of men and women determine the distinction. Many people have the perception that gender is always related to women. Gender is an attribute inherent in men and women that is culturally shaped. Gender also shapes the structure of every aspect of human social life. As a concept in social analysis, gender refers to a set of traits, roles, responsibilities, functions, rights, and behaviours inherent in men and women as cultural forms (Nyarko, 2020). Society creates attitudes and behaviours based on gender, including those that determine what should distinguish women and men. This belief is also passed down from generation to generation through the process of socialisation, both within the family, community, educational institutions, and religion. Gender can also be understood as a consequence of differences in biological anatomy that encourage the emergence of cultural aspects.

Gender is socially and culturally constructed to distinguish the varied roles of men and women. There are biological differences between women and men, but culture interprets these biological differences as a set of social demands regarding appropriate behaviour, and, in turn, rights, resources and power (Akinola, 2018). While these demands vary widely by society, there are some striking similarities. For example, gender parity refers to an equal situation between men and women, especially in terms of fulfilling rights and obligations. Nonetheless, women often experience discrimination; for example, there are still many cases of violence against women. With the passage of time, the community began to work together to fight for gender equality. Women have dared to enter the realm of tasks or jobs that men mostly do. As a process, gender creates the social differences that define women and men. In social interaction throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain the gender order. The very injunction to be given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once.

Traditional Approaches to Gender Roles and Relations

The traditional approaches to gender emphasise men's dominance over their female counterparts. The traditional constructions of gender roles and gendered heterosexual practices are still dominant in many communities (Nyarko, 2020). There is clear recognition of the pervasiveness of traditional gender roles, which involve women being focused on the family and domestic reproduction and men fulfilling the traditional role of breadwinner (Akinola, 2018). In addition, women are still expected to be submissive to their husbands, and men are still constructed as the primary decision makers. Churches are seen as supportive of these traditional roles, as was traditional culture, so that women were expected to obtain permission from their husbands for their actions, and men were to be obeyed (Zhang et al., 2021). Such discourses of culture and tradition have been illustrated in other studies to be significant in the rationalisation and naturalisation of gender roles and power relations.

The dominant construction of men as leaders and authorities in the public realm is still strong in many communities. The traditional approach emphasises the fact that, in community organisations and civil society

structures, men assumed leadership positions, although it was often women who did the hands-on work. Society often expects women to take care of the home while men go to work. Many men see themselves as the dominant figures, believing that women should always agree with them, even when they are wrong. In terms of gender roles, the chairman is a man; even though the committee combines both sexes, there is still a notion that men must lead. Nonetheless, it is like that because it has been happening over the years. Males' dominance is still there, although women are very much active.

Culture, Tradition and Gender Discrimination

Women and men have distinct gender roles across different societies and cultures. Men dominate the economic sphere and decision-making positions. At the same time, women are believed to be on the domestic front, engaged mainly in menial endeavours that do not yield economic and political empowerment. The result of gender discrimination is therefore the unequal distribution of wealth in favour of men, hence the prevalence of women's poverty.

The ongoing cultural and traditional debate regarding gender focus on culture/tradition as key issues in relation to the continued reproduction of gender difference and power inequality. Some communities reject traditional gender discourses, arguing that, ideally, partners should share household and workplace roles and make decisions jointly; therefore, it is evident that most communities do not view this as a normative practice. The distancing of some communities from dominant gender-relations practices reflects processes of change and the imperative to subscribe, at least discursively, to the now politically correct language of gender equality.

Traditional notions of male dominance and female subservience are still intact, along with traditional gender roles that mandated a division of labour between the household women's domain and the paid workforce men's domain. Moreover, although violence against women is deplored, others saw it as a normal and expected part of heterosexual relationships (Bayeh, 2016). Family structures reinforce women's dependence on male partners, as women are sometimes told to stay in abusive situations for the sake of the family.

Furthermore, a discourse of culture and tradition, as well as biological determinist notions, is echoed in the male sexual drive discourse, where deliberations serve to rationalise and reproduce traditional gender roles, relations and practices (Gupta, 2020). On the other hand, it was constantly noted how particular discourses used to describe, explain and rationalise gender inequalities and gender-based violence are reflected across cultures in this country and globally, and how frequently culture is used in multiple contexts as a discursive tool in the naturalisation and legitimisation of gender inequalities. In terms of gendered power in general, it is perceived that material and economic sources of power for women are growing, particularly the increasing number of employed women and the high level of unemployment among men.

Gender norms also negatively affect people with diverse gender identities, who often face violence, stigma and discrimination as a result, including in healthcare settings (Jeske, 2022). Women and girls also face unacceptably high levels of violence rooted in gender inequality. They are at grave risk of harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and early forced marriage. Therefore, understanding gender roles and gendered power relations is necessary to address persistent gender inequality and related social problems, such as the continued high rates of gender-based violence. Social constructions assume that the meanings people make of their lives, the discourses they draw on through language or language-like systems, reflect broader social discourses and serve to legitimise, bolster, and reproduce such discourses, as well as, in some cases, resist and challenge them. The various social aspects that relate to social constructionism. These social aspects include family, societal structures and religion.

Family Socialisation and Gender Roles

The concept of family has been evolving. In the past, a family was identified as a heteronormative system (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). This means that it was understood to be made up of a heterosexual couple and children. Family is a group of people related to one another by blood, sexual, and/or legal ties (Larson, 2019). This definition does not view the family in terms of biological sex characteristics. The expansion of the definition of the family is related to the fact that there is a rise in same-sex relationships both in South Africa and internationally.

The family is the first setting into which people are socialised. Therefore, it is in this system that they learn values, principles and socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Consequently, the family is a system that can predict the likelihood of people adopting traditional or non-traditional ways of expressing their gender identity. One of the first things children learn is whether they are male or female. This has several implications. For instance, in most traditional families, children are often dressed in gender-specific colours. For instance, girls are often dressed in pink, whereas boys are dressed in blue. This influences gender socialisation. This also illustrates the principles of the Social Learning Theory (Bandura et al., 1963). Other ways in which children are made aware of their gender differences are in the toys they play with. It is common for female children to be given dolls and kitchen sets, while male children are likely to receive gifts such as cars, guns, or tools that suggest the importance of manual labour.

At an early age, women and men are made aware of gender differences and the gender-stereotypical messages they receive (Khoza, 2021). Family instils the belief that women are responsible for household duties, whereas men are responsible for providing for the household or being productive in the workplace. Parents' approach towards gender roles has been linked to gender-typed attitudes and behaviours that emerging adults adopt. The quality of the relationship between children and their parents may contribute to adults adopting their parents' proposed expression of gender identity.

It is crucial to take into account the country's political history. For instance, in prior-apartheid South Africa, there was a deliberate emphasis that feminine identity was inferior to masculine identity. However, this perception appears to have transformed with the rise of democracy. Men in contemporary society have embraced a modern viewpoint on masculinity. For instance, it has been reported that African men have learned to be less controlling towards women, which did not exist in the apartheid era (Lecoutere, 2017). This perception is embraced in different families. The realisation that men and women should be treated as equals has resulted in men being less dominating. The literature reveals that the structure of the home can demonstrate this. For instance, in some households, men and women divide the household responsibilities evenly.

Social Structures and Gender Discrimination

Social structures are defined as specific institutions in which interactions between people occur. For instance, social structures include schools, sports groups, economic status groups, education, the law and social classes. Therefore, they desire a sense of belonging. In this regard, societies know themselves in relation to others and the social structures in which they function. In an attempt to belong, the society might adhere to societal standards for what it means to be male, female, feminine, masculine or even androgynous. They might do so without questioning or considering what their personal stance is on issues of gender identity.

There is a historical explanation for the existence of occupational segregation both in South Africa and globally. Women are often required to assume the majority of unpaid childcare and domestic work. Thus, limiting their time for education, training and paid employment. Women's ability to bear children is one of the characteristics that have traditionally put them at a disadvantage when it comes to the job market. This means that during pregnancy and after delivery, they are more likely to require time off from work. This can negatively impact

production in the workplace. The ability to bear children has hence been identified as an interruption to the continuity of employment.

Women were identified as domestic and maternal beings, and women who entered the labour market were regarded as inferior to men. The salary gap between men and women demonstrated this. Therefore, masculine and feminine identities were subject to inequality. In the South African culture, masculinity is closely related to concepts such as aggression, competition, power and a violent nature. Masculinity is also understood to be superior to femininity. Young women are less likely than young men to obtain a degree or qualification in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, despite doing slightly better in science than their male peers (Saifuddin et al., 2022). Young men are also more likely than young women to gain the digital skills needed in today's economy.

Religion and Gender Discrimination

Gender identity develops across different domains, including religion. The domain of religion can be used to foster attachment and to improve levels of emotional involvement (Ashdown et al., 2014). Religion can also be utilised as a tool to assist in developing a self-concept. An example of this self-concept is gender identity. Ultimately, religion has a large influence on the understanding of gender identity and the process of gender identity development. Religion influences how people understand their position in society (Parveen, 2022). Christian women are believed to be religious, dependable, righteous, trustworthy, noble, diligent, loving, sympathetic, pure, meek, submissive and passive (Parwez & Patel, 2022). It is further indicated in the scripture that women of Christ are homemakers, mothers, and ultimately devoted to God. In addition, they are inspirational and a source of strength to their husbands. Christian women are expected to have high moral standards and bring joy to those around them.

Sen's Capability Theory

Sen notes that his approach has strong conceptual connections to Aristotle's understanding of human flourishing, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx (Sen, 1979). Marx discussed the importance of functioning and capability for human well-being. For example, Sen cites Smith's analysis of relative poverty in *The Wealth of Nations*, noting how a country's wealth and cultural norms shaped which material goods were understood to be necessities (Sen, 1979). Sen also cites Marx's foundational concern with "replacing the domination of circumstances and chance over individuals by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances".

Sen's capability framework proposes that social arrangements should be evaluated primarily according to the extent of the freedom people have to promote and achieve the functions they value (Sen, 1979). Amartya Sen's capability theory approach is a theoretical framework that involves two core normative claims. Firstly, the assumption that freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). Secondly, that freedom to achieve well-being must be understood in terms of people with capabilities (Sen, 1979). Therefore, the real opportunities to do and be what they value. The theory has been developed into a variety of more specific normative theories, such as those of social justice or the narratives of development ethics. It has also given rise to a new, highly interdisciplinary literature in the social sciences, resulting in new social statistics and indicators. The new policy paradigm used mainly in developing studies is the so-called human development approach or human well-being.

The capability approach focuses directly on the quality of life that individuals are actually able to achieve. Sen (1979) referred to empowerment as principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them, that have guided research on and social intervention among poor and marginalised populations. This quality of life is analysed in terms of the core concepts of functionings and capabilities. Functionings are states of being and doing, such as being well-

nourished and having shelter. They should be distinguished from the commodities employed to achieve them. Capability refers to the set of valuable functionings that a person has effective access to (Breuer & Asiedu, 2017). Thus, a person's capability represents an individual's effective freedom to choose among different functioning combinations and kinds of life that they have reason to value.

In relation to women's empowerment, the capabilities approach addresses the quality of life that women can achieve. This quality of life is analysed in terms of the central concepts of functioning and capability. Sen argues that the correct approach to assessing how well people are doing is to evaluate their ability to live a life that has reason to value it, rather than their wealth of resources or subjective well-being. However, to begin to assess how women perform in terms of capacity, first there must be a determination of which functions are important to the good life and how much or at least specify an assessment procedure to determine this.

Assessing capability is more information-demanding than other accounts of advantage because it not only has a much broader view of what constitutes the achievement of well-being but also attempts to assess the freedom women actually have to make high-quality choices. However, the value of a set of capabilities represents an individual's effective freedom to live a life that is valuable in terms of the value of the functionings available to that individual, when available functionings are enhanced, so is the individual's effective freedom. The capability approach allows a very wide range of dimensions of advantage to be positively evaluated. This allows for an open diagnostic approach to what is going well or badly in women's lives, revealing unexpected shortfalls or successes across different dimensions without aggregating them into a single number (Mamun, 2022). The focus can be tightened depending on the purpose of the evaluation exercise and relevant evaluative and informational constraints.

The capability approach claims that freedom to achieve well-being is a matter of what women can do and be (Mamun, 2022). Therefore, the kind of life they can effectively lead. As Sen argues, women's commodities, wealth, or mental reactions are an inappropriate angle because they provide limited or indirect information about how life is going (Ruffle, 2022).

A review of recent literature indicates that prior studies on gender discrimination and women's empowerment have predominantly focused on workplace dynamics in public and private institutions, typically situated in urban contexts (Kim & Oh, 2022; Zhang, 2022; Gupta, 2023). In contrast, there remains a notable paucity of research that critically examines the nature and underlying factors contributing to gender discrimination from the perspective of women's empowerment in rural communities, particularly within the Limpopo Province of South Africa.

3. Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this paper is primarily qualitative and interpretative, guided by philosophical assumptions that enable a critical analysis of the implications of social constructionism and Sen's capability approach for understanding gender discrimination and women's empowerment. A qualitative literature review was conducted, involving the systematic analysis and synthesis of recent scholarly works in English published in peer-reviewed journals, with Google Scholar as the primary search engine. As Mwita (2022) explains, a literature review entails the systematic collection and examination of existing written materials to generate insights relevant to a study's research questions. Accordingly, the materials selected for this study were evaluated for their merit in offering valuable perspectives on gender discrimination and women's empowerment in rural communities in developing countries.

4. Results

In conclusion, the capabilities approach is defined by its choice of focus on the moral significance of individuals' ability to achieve the kind of life they have reason to value. This distinguishes it from more established approaches to ethical evaluation. They focus exclusively on subjective well-being or the availability of means for good living, respectively. The set of valuable beings and actions defines a person's ability to live a good life. Like having good health or having loving relationships with other people to whom they have real accessibility. From the theories, the following conceptual framework has been formulated (see Figure 1 below).

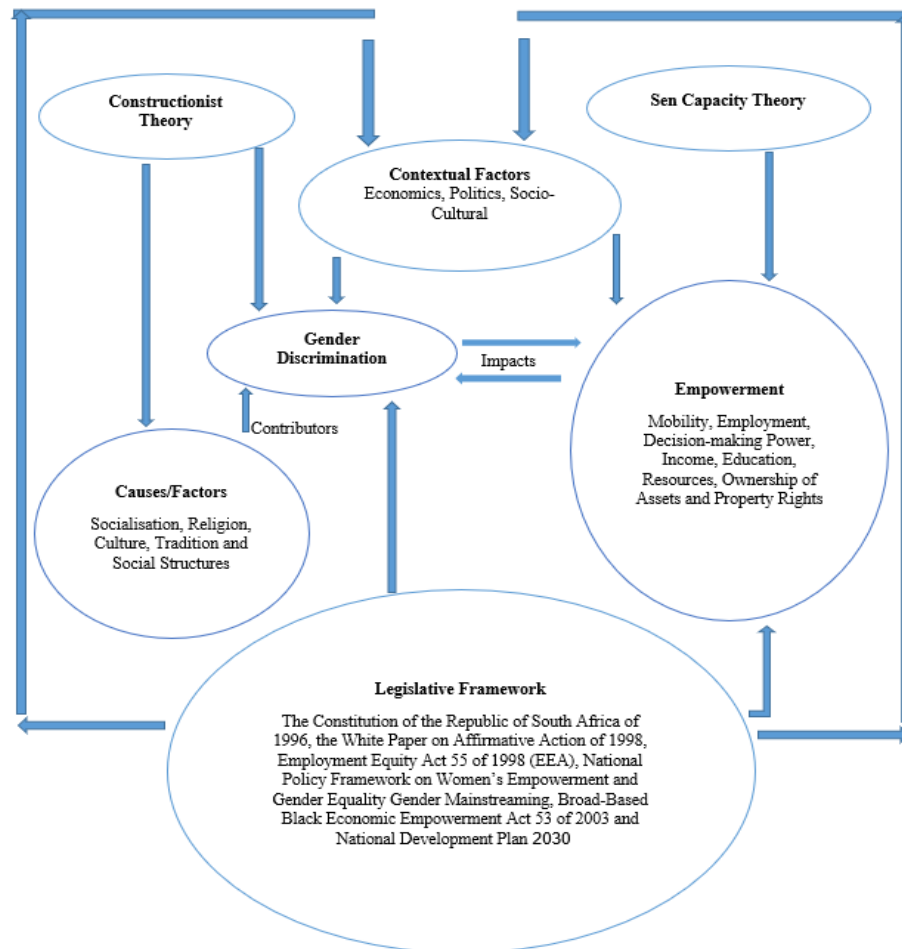


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: the authors

The framework explains the relationship between gender discrimination and women's empowerment in the study, drawing on Social Constructionist and Sen's Capability Theory. According to the theory, gender is not a biological product but a social construct created and perpetuated by society, and gender roles, expectations, and standards are shaped by social interactions and cultural practices. This theory contends that gender discrimination occurs when individuals are subjected to unfair or disparate treatment based on their gender, hence limiting their opportunities and access to resources. It emphasises how gender stereotypes and societal norms impact how men and women are treated and given chances in different ways. Generally, the social constructionist provides a framework for understanding and addressing the systemic basis of gender discrimination and emphasises how society affects gender roles and inequities.

Constructionists argue that gender discrimination manifests through religion, socialisation, culture, tradition and social structures. All the aspects have either direct or indirect negative impact on what Sen believes are the indicators of empowerment (mobility, employment, decision-making power, income, education, resources, ownership of assets and property rights). Although there is a legislative framework and policies that seek to eliminate all forms of discrimination, gender discrimination persists. However, it is worth noting that the context in which it manifests varies from place to place.

Conclusion

Gender discrimination occurs on a continuum and is influenced by various societal factors. These factors included family, social structures and religion. The expression of femininity and masculinity has racial implications. The places occupied by men and women in history were different. Historically, men had more privileges than women and consequently more opportunities, especially in the labour market. This is because society operated as a binary, unequal system. It is also important to note that white men had more privileges than men belonging to other racial groups. The social construction of gender has been shown to affect empowerment and disparities in the economic, cultural, social, and political standing of women worldwide.

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