

Obstacles to Women's Creative Contributions to Culture

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The paper begins objectively capturing the scarcity of women recognized for their contribution to culture throughout history. The sociocultural obstacles that have been fundamentally responsible for relegating the works of creative women to anonymity are analyzed. It also analyzes the way in which women, since they were girls, have introjected that differential role in society that attributes the role of caregivers to them, generally leaving, in the background, the realization of a creative vocation in a domain. Finally, following the recent results of research on gender and creativity—including that of the author herself—the keys are defined that can contribute to canceling the gender gap in terms of increasing creative contributions to culture by women and their recognition.

Keywords: creativity, women, discrimination, domain, field

Brief Historical Review of Gender and Creativity

The conclusions of the 2014 World Economic Forum stated that gender differences would not end until after 80 years. And, curiously, according to the 2022 Forum the data are even more pessimistic: we have 132 years left!

Certainly, the issue of inequality has affected and continues to affect what has to do with women's creative production. Women have always been relegated in the possibilities of making contributions to culture both in the scientific and technical field and in the arts, literature, music, etc. And when, despite such difficulties, they have made relevant contributions, these have not been recognized on many occasions and on others they have been recognized because they bear the signature of a man; such as the case of Alma Mahler, considered the muse of her husband Gustav Mahler when some compositions attributed to him were Alma's.

To cite a relevant example of current events in Spain—which could be extrapolated to any country—we have the following data:

- Works of art by women exhibited in the rooms of the Prado Museum: 1%
- Women winners of the Cervantes Prize: 13%

In the last half century or so, thanks to feminist studies, a different vision of the analysis of contexts in creative production in different periods of history is being promoted. Research on creative women constitutes a necessity and a challenge.

One of the most interesting initiatives to recover the biographies of academics in Europe is found in the Dictionnaire Universel de Créatrices, an open and constantly evolving initiative that aims to recover the trajectory and contributions of women creators and the impact of their work on western knowledge.

All manifestations of culture, including scientific and technological progress, are based on the contributions of creative minds, capable of providing novelty and value to each of the areas. The defining characteristics of

this very complex dimension of human nature do not establish distinctions between men and women, or between potentially creative boys and girls: both in the cognitive functions inherent to creative thinking and in the personality traits or motivation and attitudes there are no gender differences (Romo, 2018).

Certainly, what fundamentally explains the lack of recognized creative women has to do with the social dimension involved in the processes to achieve recognition in a discipline. In explaining the phenomenon, we adopt the model of Csikszentmihalyi (1998) who, in a scientific analysis of creativity from psychology, speaks of three systems: individual, domain, and field. It is not enough to have a person endowed with the skills of creative thinking and the non-cognitive traits that are characteristic of him; A domain or discipline is needed where that person contributes the creative product and finally, a field is necessary, we refer to the experts who recognize the value of that product and incorporate it into the discipline: “the guardians of the field” he says. This is where the explanation for the lack of eminent women lies. Normally, the fields have been composed fundamentally of men where there is a greater predisposition to recognition of male authors than of female authors, in addition to an inertia of centuries that is difficult to break. But also—as we are going to see—we must consider the obstacles that women have historically had in accessing the field and the discipline.

Women Creators in the 21st Century

In the countries of the Western world, gender equality has been achieved in legal terms. If this is so, why do women continue to be relegated in almost all areas in their contributions to culture?

As Csikszentmihalyi's system model reflects, the explanation for this marginalization has been and is sociocultural in nature. On the one hand, this explains the difficulty of accessing fields or disciplines. It is clear that the formal obstacles to access higher education in disciplines related to creativity, in general, have disappeared and that there are as many female as male students at universities pursuing these studies. However, access to the profession is another thing, here the scissors effect occurs which, according to feminist studies, determines an inversion in proportions: later there will be more men who are exercising this creative activity than women.

But in addition, the recognition of creative production by the fields determines that this production is immensely less valued if it comes from female authors. I remember the data mentioned at the beginning about women winners of the Cervantes Prize and I also add another very significant fact that also helps to explain this discrimination: in the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the institution responsible for awarding literary prizes, there are currently 33 men and eight women!

This ambiguous situation for creative women of the 21st century is very well captured in the feminist metaphor of the glass ceiling: The glass ceiling is an invisible barrier, a subtle form of discrimination that makes it difficult to achieve recognition, at the same level as men, in contributions to culture in any of its forms.

There are many statistics that we could bring here, from any area of culture, in addition to those already mentioned, to show how difficult it is to break that ceiling. The awarding of the Nobel Prizes is the most significant example: only 6% have been women since the first prize was awarded in 1901. Only 17 women have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, that is, one woman for every nine men (The last woman, by the way, obtained it in the edition of 2022: Annie Ernaux). And in the Nobel Prize winners in science the proportion is even lower. These data are more scandalous if we consider that among applicants there are currently similar proportions of men and women and, especially, if we consider that this systematic discrimination is not considered a problem.

We always have to return to the Csikszentmihalyi triangle and the guardians of the gates of the field who decide who can pass through them and who cannot: who will achieve recognition and eminence. But it is also true that there are internal barriers of the woman herself that often limit her aspirations to be part of the advanced people in a discipline. The introjection, by women, of the sociocultural barriers to the recognition of creative genius, determines exclusively feminine traits in the creative attitude that are limiting, such as greater self-demand and self-criticism, greater dependence on external reinforcement, or even feelings of guilt in the face of the supposed abandonment of the role of “caregivers” that society attributes to us (Romo, 2018).

But, in the society of globalization, innovation, and change, we cannot afford to ignore the contributions that half of humanity can make to the advancement of culture.

Within this framework, we need to address research into the reasons that hold back the majority of women from achieving excellence and recognition in the areas of creative work. And the best way to achieve this knowledge is by investigating the biographies of recognized women in different fields through in-depth interviews, as we have done in our research with eminent Spanish women (Romo, 2018, 2020; Porto & Romo, 2021). Our interview model inquired about the obstacles that these women had to overcome in their careers to fulfill their creative vocation in a field, from the family—both the one of origin and the one they have formed—school, university, and the obstacles they had in their professional field due to their status as women.

Keys to Bridge the Gender Gap

But, if we can currently talk about these keys to achieving the recognition of female creativity, it is because of the dedication that many women—and some men, it must be said—have had so that the gender gap is definitively overcome and that they are no longer necessary in the future. But today they are necessary.

In fact, until the beginning of this century the systematic approach to the problem has not begun, and previous works have been scarce, and the most relevant ones have also been carried out by women: we must mention authors such as Ravenna Helson, Jane Piirto, or Sally Reiss.

All studies affect differential socialization from childhood and the introjection of roles that society has attributed to women throughout history, such as the exclusive role of caregivers, which is incompatible with a dedication to a creative vocation, whether in the field to be. The keys are fundamental in overcoming the barriers that we have as children to develop creativity due to this differential socialization and to have recognition as adults.

A paradigmatic example of the precocious assumption of these differential gender roles is the work published in the *Science Magazine* by Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian (2017). These authors worked in three cities in the USA with 400 children. The results are very significant: in the first test, a group of 96 boys and girls aged five, six, and seven read a story about a very intelligent person, and they were asked to guess the sex of the person. They were then asked to combine certain traits, such as “being smart”, with images of men and women. The results showed that boys and girls of five years are able to associate brilliance with their own gender. On the other hand, at six years old, girls have already incorporated gender stereotypes: they think that being brilliant or gifted is more common in men than in women, very worrying results that demonstrate how in the 21st century we continue to educate boys and girls differentially from early childhood.

In our research with 25 eminent Spanish women, there was great agreement among them regarding the fundamental gender obstacles they had had to deal with in realizing their creative vocation (Porto & Romo, 2022). Our interviewees were recognized women in very diverse areas of creative production: painting, sculpture,

musical creation, dance, journalism, literature, business, science, etc. And, certainly, there was agreement among all of them regarding gender obstacles. These were:

Undervaluation of Creativity

They spoke of the delay compared to their male colleagues in being recognized and even of obscure criteria, on the part of the guardians of the field, of the experts, in the assessment of their creative work.

Imbalance Between Family and Creative Work

Our women, through an effort to harmonize the multiple roles they played, sought balance. However, they mentioned challenges, such as the interruption of their professional career due to the availability required by the family, the loss of professional opportunities when prioritizing their children, and conflicts with their partners when comparing the evolution of their careers.

Access to Financial Resources

Gender inequality in access to resources is a trend of historical origin that impacts various domains. This asymmetry skews fair competition for creativity, especially considering that fewer requirements are placed on men to provide them with more resources. Access to financial resources is an obstacle to women's creativity.

Upon becoming aware of discrimination in access to resources, the women reported that internal blockages and doubts about the continuity of their creative work were generated.

Androgenic Career Expectations

In creative activities, a definition of excellence associated with linear and progressive careers is promoted, as the case studies show. However, men are identified more frequently with that type of constant career trajectory, while women—at least at the beginning of their career—suffer ups and downs related to the other obstacles that we are dealing. That's why we're considering that those standards have an androgenic bias.

Majority of Men in Positions of Authority

Creative women highlighted the predominance of men in positions of power in their domains, pointing out how this posed an obstacle to their work and impacted their professional progress.

The lack of female role models in positions of leadership and eminence limits women's ability to imagine their own success in their fields and reinforces the idea that only men can achieve success. In research carried out with creative women (Kronborg, 2021; Prado & Fleith, 2020), the importance of them having as references other women or profiles with which they can identify to persist in their creative projects is highlighted. Androgenic predominance in positions of authority represents an obstacle to women's creativity.

The results of our research lead us to the following conclusions regarding the guidelines to reduce the gender gap in creative production, organized according to the three systems of the Csikszentmihalyi model (Porto & Romo, 2021).

Regarding the person:

- Promote, from childhood, encouragement from the family and recognize differentiation.
- Promote complex, interdisciplinary, and multicultural education.
- In adult creative dedication: recognize gender obstacles, do not deny them, and take action about them.

Regarding the domain:

- Redefine incentives and openness towards diversity.
- Challenge gender stereotypes.

- Stimulate inclusive policies and practices.
- Provide accessible training and resources.

Regarding the field:

- Establish non-androgenic norms.
- Promote mentoring.

Conclusion

If we seek to break with the predominance of men at the highest levels of creativity, we must promote the openness and incentives of the domains for women and establish non-androgenic norms by the domains, to provide equitable conditions, according to the model of systems by Csikszentmihalyi that describes domain and field as generating forces of creativity. Fatally in the 21st century, we still need to reinforce the importance for society of promoting equity in creativity. Depending on sociocultural barriers, few women—comparatively to men—become recognized as highly creative in multiple branches of knowledge.

Reflecting on the important creative advances that we fail to make and/or recognize due to inherited discrimination against women, we argue that equity in creativity is a societal need. Considering the complexity of the innovation demands of the 21st century, the creativity of more than half of the population cannot continue to be repressed and underestimated due to their gender.

Equality is not only a need for women but is rather a requirement to promote the advancement of society. It is irreplaceable in the most diverse domains for a more inclusive and diverse development of humanity.

Although the exceptional achievements of some women are important and drive the reduction of the gender gap, because they promote references and break prejudices; however, they are not enough to transform society and generate equity. Women's creativity must be naturalized, breaking with the myth of the exceptional nature of the phenomenon. We don't need to train more extraordinary women, we need to make women's creative success ordinary through conditions and people who encourage, value, and disseminate it.

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