

# **ORGANISATIONAL THEORY: BEHAVIOUR POWER AND POLITICS AT WORK**

*A feminist analysis of gendered power dynamics organisational setup:  
Case of Uber's Organisational Culture*

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## Introduction

The formation of organisational theories has allowed the comprehension of general methods and concepts which can be applied to any organisation regardless of its geographical, cultural and physical environment (Perrow, 2000). Irefin, Ifah and Bwala (2012) assert that earlier most of the organisational theories treated organisations as ones involving only men. On the other hand, gender issues were treated merely as statistics. Employees were regarded as having no gender and only bundles of skills. As a result, Irefin *et al.*, (2012) argued that organisational theories early were inadequate due to the lack of attention given to women and the problems they face within an organisational setup. Furthermore, it was asserted that organisational phenomena bordering on gender issues were regarded as areas of taboo in the study of organisational theories (Martin, 2019). This issue was first identified by the European Groups for Organisational Studies that declared the issues pertaining to gender critical for any organisation. Aaltio and Mills (2002) also supported the idea that organisational theories had not been gender neutral. Hearn and Collinson (1998) further stated that organisation gender scholars argued that organisational theory that lack gender focus produces mere mainstream organisation theory which has oversimplified assumption. Hence, it is important that organisational theories include the element of feminism in the organisational setup so as to be comprehensive in nature.

Feminism is a sociological approach that considers inequality in gender as central to all behavior in organisation. Radical, liberal, psychoanalytical, Marxist, Post-Modern, Socialist, and Post-Colonial feminist all lay different claims to organisational structure (Yasmin, 2015). The central claim of the feminist theory is that traditional accounts of socio-political life are prejudicial to women (Irefin *et al.*, 2012). Ever since its proposition, the theory has gained traction as a critical framework for analyzing inequality, power, and identity in organisational contexts. The theory criticises the patriarchal assumptions embedded in managerial practices and organisational cultures and draws attention towards issues of gender neutrality in workplace dynamics (Calas and Smircich, 2006). Feminist theorists argue that organisations are not gender-neutral spaces which are deeply infused with masculine norms which privilege rationality, hierarchical control, and competitiveness over empathy, collaboration, and inclusion (Acker, 1990).

The objective of the present paper is to explore the application and relevance of feminist theory through a critical analysis of gendered power dynamics in organisational setting in general and at

Uber in particular. The rationale for choosing Uber as the case focus is that Uber has often been investigated over complaints about gender discrimination (BBC, 2018). Also, previously there had been a compliant by a former engineer Susan Fowler over the systematic failures in Uber's human resource practices and the response from leadership over sexual harassment complaints. This paper will draw from John Acker's concept of inequality regimes to show the maintenance of persistent patterns of inequality across gender (Acker, 2006). The same framework will also be used to analyse Uber's organisational structure, and it will highlight how pervasive systems of exclusion operate within high-growth companies.

### **Feminist Theory in Organisational Studies**

Feminist theory in organisational studies tend to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy which underscore the traditional management frameworks (Fotaki and Pullen, 2024). The theory argues that organisations are not merely rational systems to achieve productivity and efficiency, but they should instead be construed as social constructs which are shaped by power relations, gendered norms, and discourses (Calas and Smircich, 1996). This represents the shift in perspective from functional explanations to critical interrogations of how power is sustained and enacted through seemingly neutral practices.

Martin (2003) further explains that the argument of feminist theorists is that gender is not only a variable that needs to be measured instead, but also a fundamental organising principle that impacts access to authority, resources, and legitimacy within organisations. Acker (1990) talked about the term "gendered substructure" which means that gender exists as an intertwined part of the organisational design. This perspective also may be interpreted in terms of the argument that workplace norms, job roles, evaluation systems, and hierarchies do not ignore gender but instead it tends to reinforce and reflect masculinity and male privilege.

One of the foundational contributions to the feminist theory of organisation derives from Acker (1990) who presented the concept of inequality regime which is defined as interrelated processes, practices, meanings, and actions which result in gender, class, and rational inequalities within particular organisations. Acker (1990) presented different dimensions of inequality regimes which included gender inequality as well. Moreover, the study emphasised that inequality is further normalised through informal networks, bureaucratic procedures, and organisational cultures.

Shaw and Lee (2004) argued that feminism in general tend to eliminate systems of injustice and inequality in lives of women. However, it is important to know that feminism is not a monolithic ideology instead it comprises of a range of social and political movements and ideologies which fight for and promote gender equality (Mohajen, 2022). Hence, feminist theory itself is an extension of the feminist ideology. Applying the perspective to organisation means that there exists an organisational silence around inequality and inequality regimes are often invisible because they are normalised and embedded in routine practices through managerial rhetoric about innovation and performance (Acker, 1990).

Feminist theory of organisation also tends to intersect with other critical approaches such as poststructuralism that challenges the binary understanding of gender and propose the concept of gender performativity (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a fixed identify but it is a repeated performance which is shaped by institutional and discursive expectations. Lewis (2014) further supports the same assertion and further argue that it is particularly relevant in professional contexts where women feel pressured to perform masculine tasks so as to gain legitimacy and recognition. Alternatively, the feminist critiques to organisational theories also extend beyond gender to embrace intersectionality, which was a concept presented by Crenshaw (1991). This concept argued how different forms of oppression tend to intersect in order to shape the experiences of people in organisations.

Feminist theorists also tend to challenge the neutrality of managerial practices in hiring, team leadership, and performance appraisals that are otherwise perceived as objective (Syed and Murray, 2008). For example, Ely and Meyersn (2000) criticized the diversity programs which tend to focus on superficial inclusion and assimilation without addressing the underlying power structures. Likewise, Gherardi and Poogio (2001) argued that organisational learning and knowledge sharing also tend to be gendered processes which are shaped by one who is legitimate and credible. In addition to this, feminist theory tends to raise important questions regarding masculinity in organisations (Dowd, 2010). In this matter, the Connell (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity can be used to understand why traits such as risk taking, dominance, and emotional detachment are valorised in such setups.

Apart from the feminist perspective of organisational practices in general, there is also a strand of literature which tend to draw its relevance particularly to the human resource development (Howell

*et al.*, 2002). For example, Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019) stated that feminist theory is useful to study the practice of human resource development because it can help in understanding and then responding to the manner in which processes, policies, structures and cultures operate to suppress some while privilege others. Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019) asserted that with human resource literature there is little focus on issues of feminism and that very few scholars have challenged the masculine rationality in organisational processes and culture. On the other hand, scholars in management and organisation studies have explored the perspective such as the management scholars challenging the patriarchal attitudes and norms which are openly manifested within organisations (Ferry, 2025). Ozdemir (2024) further supported that women are ignored or silenced in male dominated work environments. Rudman and Phelan (2008) added that task oriented, assertive, and strong women were judged as argumentative and difficult to get along with. Ford and Morgan (2023) further elaborated that women displaying masculine trends were tried to be disempowered within organisations. Moreover, they were motivated to soften up in order to be accepted. Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe (2016) further provided evidence that women were also forced to negotiate their identities in order to be accepted in male dominated work environments. Thus, management and organisational studies have focused on organisational processes and structures as demonstrating patriarchal attitudes that marginalised women and prioritized men at management and leadership levels particularly. Stamarski and Hing (2015) in context of it stated that this practice of oppression and hegemony was not only perpetuated by men but also women who participated in the process of male dominance.

### **Case of Uber**

Uber Technologies was founded in 2009 by Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp, which proved revolutionary for the transportation industry as it introduced an efficient and convenient ride-sharing platform (Trama, n.d.). It has its headquarters in San Francisco, California and has become a global phenomenon which provides on-demand rides, food delivery and other services through its innovative mobile application. The company boasts a disruptive business model which was able to capture markets beyond United States. The success of the company has been market by its rapid growth and technological advancements. At the same time, the company has also occasionally faced controversial interactions with traditional taxi services and local regulations.

The global scaling of Uber was at the height from 2014 to 2017 when it was valued at nearly \$70 billion and had operations in more than 80 countries. However, its exponential market growth also displayed the working of a male dominated work culture at the back. The issue came to the forefront when Susan Fowler, a software engineer through her blogpost detailed her experience of discrimination and sexual harassment at Uber which not only went viral but also paved the way for the ousting of the CEO, Travis Kalanick and many other powerful men in the tech (The Guardian, 2018). This has been coupled with the internal motto of Uber which was “always be hustling” that placed emphasis on disruption, risk taking and an unrelentless ambition. Hence, the values at the workplace promoted aggressive behavior which was rewarded whereas impersonal and ethical concerns at Uber were dismissed. Susan Fowler’s blogpost marked the start of bringing the internal culture of Uber under public scrutiny. Fowler drew notice to the systematic gender discrimination, repeated incidents of sexual harassment, and the failure of the HR to respond adequately to her complaints. Her revelations led to internal investigations, external audits, and significant executive turnover (The Guardian, 2018).

The revelations of Fowler and subsequent investigations basically drew attention to the deeply gendered organisational structure where performance evaluations, informal networks and leadership opportunities tended to marginalise women on one hand and protect the male dominance on the other. These events at Uber not only renders it as a case of corporate failure in HR governance and ethical leadership but also makes it a relevant empirical example to see the application of feminist theory in contemporary organisational context.

### **Critical analysis of Uber in light of feminist theory**

The case of Uber displays a workplace culture that exposes a deeply embedded gendered organisational culture. The blogpost of Susan Fowler in 2017 brought this to the forefront which showed the case of patriarchy and lack of women equality in the work environment. Acker’s (2006) concept of inequality regime can be used as an effective framework to analyse how systematically gendered inequalities are sustained and normalized within big organisations such as Uber. Acker (2006) explained inequality regimes as interrelated processes, practices and meanings which contribute towards gender, class and racial inequalities within particular organisations. This framework helps in understanding how the internal architecture and leadership ethos characterized

the Uber work environment and how they reinforced a regime of exclusionary networks, masculine dominance, and structural marginalisation of women.

### **Masculinities define organisational culture at Uber**

The workplace culture at Uber as observed through journalistic investigations and internal audits showed a culture of aggression, excessive risk taking and competition (Carol, 2018). These traits tend to overlap with traits which are usually associated with hegemonic masculinity; individualism, assertiveness, and dominance, that are institutionalised as performance norms (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The culture at Uber was not incidental, rather it was cultivated under the leadership of the CEO Travis Kalanick. Kalanick had also faced criticism over the “baller” culture of Uber where he jokingly mentioned his position at Uber as one that increased his appeal to women (della Cava, 2017). There were accusations of sexism as being compounded for years that made Uber an uncomfortable place for many women who were working there. Thus, Uber’s culture reflected a leadership environment where gendered stereotypes were not just tolerated but were valorised.

From the perspective of the feminist theory, the culture of Uber seems to align with what Acker (2006) described as gendered organisation where evaluation criteria and job roles are constructed around male behaviors and bodies. This is evident because at Uber the culture was characterised with dominance and hustle. Moreover, values of empathy and collaboration were devalued as feminine. Women employees were deviated from these norms and those who raised their voices such as Fowler, were ignored or silenced.

### **Gendered division of labor at Uber**

Feminist theory also draws attention to issues of division of labor and differential access to career progression (Chafetz, 1988). At Uber, the company’s own diversity reports showed that women were underrepresented in technical and leadership positions. For example, a CNBC (2017) news revealed that in 2017 women made up only 15% of the technical roles at Uber and their representation at senior engineering and executive positions was even less. This is also supported by Acker (2006) who stated that regimes or inequality are also often maintained through hiring, role allocation processes, and promotion which although seem to be neutral but in actual are shaped by embedded biases.

At Uber career progression of women and their job roles displayed biasedness. For example, promotions and performance evaluations at Uber depended upon manager discretion and informal networks where women were systematically disadvantaged due to exclusion from mentoring networks, social bonds, and male-dominated leadership circles (Isaac, 2017). Furthermore, the blogpost of Fowler also showed that managers often downplayed or ignored the complaints from female employees which further reinforced a culture of gender bias.

### **Inequality and lack of visibility women felt at Uber**

Another key dimension of Acker's framework is visibility or invisibility as a case of inequality. At Uber, discriminatory behavior and disparities were not only prevalent but also, they were ignored as mere by-products of a high-performance culture. It is also the role of the HR department to ensure that mechanisms of institutional accountability are in place that could account for any issues that come up. However, Fowler's report showed that at Uber, the HR department ignored her continuous complaints of sexual harassment against a manager only because he was a high performer (The Guardian, 2018). According to Acker (2006) this was a case of legitimising inequality where organisational narratives tend to reframe bias as meritocracy. At Uber, the complicity of the HR was not merely an oversight rather, it was a structural mechanism where male power was sustained under the guise of operational success. The masculine norms were not questioned because they tended to align with Uber's self-image as a disruptor.

In addition to the above, Uber's public controversies were largely centered on gender whereby a feminist analysis grounded in intersectionality shows the embeddedness of inequalities. Intersectionality refers to the intersection of class, race, gender, and other identities which tend to shape unique experiences of marginalisation. The diversity data of Uber also showed that racial minorities were underrepresented especially Latinx and Black women in technical and leadership roles (CNBC, 2017). These women faced double exclusion, by race as well as gender. Moreover, their experiences remained invisible in mainstream conversations of diversity. Thus, from a feminist theory lens, Uber's culture was masculine, aggressive, and ignorant of women issues and women progression within the organisation.

## Critical Implications of the Analysis

The application of the feminist theory especially through the lens of Acker's (2006) regimes show that Uber was a case of organisational culture where normalized systematic inequality. One of the most important findings within feminist critique is that gendered power dynamics are not incidental or individual acts of misconduct rather they are embedded deep into the organisational practices. The case of Uber also showcased the informal networks, masculine leadership, and opaque HR processes which reinforced gender exclusion. Moreover, Uber's case shows that issues can be characterised even with high growth businesses that otherwise project themselves as progressive and meritocratic.

Acker's (2006) argument presenting the feminist perspective was that organisations are not gender-neutral entities rather, they actively engage in acts of inequality which are presented as inequality regimes. The internal systems of Uber ranged from discrimination against women from hiring to promotion, and to division of labor as well. Moreover, the culture projected male supremacy through their high performance which even led women complaints of sexual harassment go unnoticed. Hence, this shows that power in organisations is not only evident through formal authority but also it is evident through informal symbols, norms, and discursive practices.

The case of Uber can also be visualized as one that projected superficial solutions such as diversity hires, corporate apologies, or unconscious bias training. These practices should not be construed as solutions to challenging gendered inequalities. Real change on the other hand warrants a reconfiguration of how success is defined and how leadership should be exercised, solely on the basis of inclusivity and meritocracy. Organisations need to promote culture that challenge the patriarchy and adopt feminist informed structural reforms that incorporate accountability, transparency, equity, and most importantly gender neutrality (Smith, 2025).

In addition to the above, another observation from the case of Uber is that it is necessary for organisations to adopt an intersectional approach. This means that organisations should pay heed to the marginalisation of women of color and intersectional disadvantaged groups that are otherwise absent from mainstream reform agendas. The framework of intersectionality as propounded by Crenshaw (1991) is of relevance here because it argues that a one size fits all diversity policies often fails those that are at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression.

Hence, it is important for organisations to develop interventions which are sensitive to the complex interplay of gender, class, and race, as well as other axes of identity.

As a last point of analysis, it is also useful to mention that the case of Uber contributes to the feminist organisational scholarship because it shows that inequality is not the outcome of outdated practices instead, it is a strategic byproduct of cultures which are built around disruption, domination, and unchecked ambition. Therefore, the feminist theory not only critiques the existing power structures but also it offers a blueprint for organisations to reshape themselves having culture of justice, inclusivity, and shared dignity.

## **Conclusion**

The paper presents how traditionally organisational theories had been devoid of the feminist perspective and how the theories were largely focused on male dominance. The feminist perspective or theory was propounded as a critique to the time old organisational theories and practices that marginalised women within the workplace environment. This paper drew specific reference to Acker's inequality regimes where gender is one of the regimes which is prevalent in modern day's organisational practice. On the other hand, the proponents of feminist theory tended to draw attention to eliminating injustices towards women and was thus an extension of the feminist ideology. The feminist theory was further applied to the case of Uber which although has been a high growth organisation with strong bottom lines, but evidence showed marginalisation of women within the workplace culture. Journalist analysis, internal audit, and reports from Uber female employees showed that gender issues were not standalone events but were embedded deep within the organisational culture. Biasedness was portrayed from hiring to leadership positions as well as division of labor at Uber. Therefore, in light of the feminist theory it has been propounded that there is a need for organisational reform which challenges the existing power structures and allow for a more inclusive approach from hiring to career progression.

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