

The Professional, Psychological, and Physical Effects on Women Who Face Gender

Discrimination

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Throughout history, women have slowly worked their way to be accepted and treated as equals in the workforce. Their working journey began at home achieving their domestic duties, while the men worked in offices, factories, or on farms. Women who did work only obtained the jobs of teaching or helping their husbands on their families' farms. Few had to work because they were unmarried and had to support themselves financially, which was frowned upon in the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. In the manufacturing-oriented society, women and men were separated, as men worked to earn money for their families while women stayed home to complete their domestic responsibilities. This separation caused society to rule and believe that women are too moral and pure to be a part of the harsh and competitive business world. It was not until World War 2 that women were finally accepted because they were needed to replace men in factories and other occupations. Throughout this time, women were encouraged to work to keep the country afloat, which led to many posters and advertisements that marketed women to be able to do anything a man could do. This seemed to be the beginning of women being allowed to enter the working world, however, it unfortunately, did not last after the war because many of them were laid off and had to return home while the men went back to dominating the workforce.

This setback made women start again from square one because they were back to being viewed as unable to work as well as a man. This was discouraging and upsetting for many women because it made them feel like all their work was not appreciated. Also, some women wanted to continue to work because they enjoyed it. This led to the first feminist movement that marked the beginning of the continuous fight for women's equality as they demanded equal representation in the workforce and society as a whole.

In the 1960s and 1970s, men in the household were unable to earn enough to provide for their families, which caused women to contribute to the family income. Many women were unable to join certain occupations and positions in the workforce, which led to the second wave of feminism. This wave focused on demanding equal access to professions and positions in the workplace due to only being welcomed in lower-level positions, which were generally low pay.

Even after that, women were still being mistreated and unappreciated within and without organizations causing the third-wave movement to break out. This wave was considered radical as women started to protest for more legal protections to reduce gender discrimination

in society and especially in the workforce. This movement has been demonstrated as somewhat successful because laws such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, The Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and the Equal Pay Act were passed. However, even with these laws and these fights for equality women are still facing the challenges of gender discrimination.

What is gender discrimination? It is the unfair treatment and placement of disadvantage on a person because of their gender. Women face this in the workplace because of the historical view that their role is at home to take care of the children, cook, and clean while the men are the breadwinners, working in offices or factories. In the male-dominated business world, women are at a disadvantage as this view affects many recruiters' and managers' beliefs of what females are capable of. This results in women having less of a chance to be hired, promoted, paid equally, or acquire a certain field of study. This constant mistreatment and unnecessary drawbacks may also negatively impact mental and physical well-being such as an increase in anxiety, depression, lack of confidence, and life dissatisfaction.

Forms of gender discrimination women may face in a corporation include segregation, the glass ceiling effect, and sexual harassment. These actions have harmed their professional lives and even their personal lives. Recent studies have discovered that these actions have resulted in harm to women's psychological and physical health. These discoveries support the following claim that gender discrimination in the workplace negatively affects women's professional lives and consequently affects them psychologically and physically.

Segregation is the purposeful division of two different categories of people. There are two different forms of segregation that women face in the work world, horizontal and vertical. Horizontal segregation, also known as occupational segregation, can occur when "...women are employed in different categories from men in the general economy (Reeves, *Women in Business*, p20)." This means that it is the division of occupations and that a certain industry or sector is mostly made up of a certain gender. These industries tend to be at different economic levels, usually, a male-dominated industry is in a higher economic standing, while a female-dominated industry is in a lower standing. An example of a female-dominated occupation is nursing, and a male-dominated occupation is engineering. If one gender decides to join another's occupation it may be considered unacceptable, and one may experience poor treatment inside and outside of the field.

A women's professional life is affected by this because they are only truly accepted in female occupations as they are deemed as "fitted for a woman." This means that they follow and require the historical bias placed on female behavior. These behaviors or characteristics that all women are believed to acquire are nurturance, sensitivity, gentleness, affection, and empathy. These attributes are perfect for the fields of nursing and lower-level education. This is why the percentage of women in the field of nursing is overwhelming as 86% of nurses are women while 14% are men. Same with teachers as the ratio is 76% female and 25% male, but men dominate the higher positions in the education system such as principals and superintendents. These are viewed as jobs only for a woman due to their inherent nature to care for and help others.

A danger of this form of segregation is that these female professions require a lot of work and dedication but are in a lower economic category. This means that the amount of effort does not match the pay and that they are not paid as well as a man in a corporate job. This will affect women in female occupations psychologically and physically by causing burnout. This is when a worker develops emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion from an excessive amount of stress. This can harm a female's professional life because it makes them too emotionally drained to perform to their greatest potential. Their personal lives will be negatively impacted by removing their ability to do outside-of-work activities including lack of socialization, ability to enjoy hobbies and involvement in family life. This affects their mental and physical health for clear reasons of constantly being stressed and overwhelmed leading to health risks, such as high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease/heart attack, sleep problems, muscle tension or pain, headaches, and digestive problems. This stress can be caused by either the job task or the lack of financial benefits/unhappiness with the hourly wage.

Lastly, another harm horizontal segregation can cause to a female's professional life is that it will discourage women from entering fields that require "male qualities" that pay well and may be in their interest to join as not all women relate to the behavioral biases. For example, business-related fields are discouraged for a female to join because corporations are male-dominated and require "male qualities" such as competitiveness, assertiveness, and strength. For the women that do enter these male-oriented fields may face many challenges that will negatively impact them.

One of these challenges a woman may face when entering or being a part of a male occupation is a low sense of belonging. This is because women are represented as the minority in many corporate companies, which ultimately affects their feelings of acceptance by the organization and coworkers. A corporation needs to maintain a healthy environment where everyone feels like they belong as it essentially impacts job satisfaction, which eventually reflects on how an employee performs their work task. For example, workers with a low sense of belonging tend to be unhappy with their job, which will lead to low satisfaction and poor job performance. This was demonstrated by a study performed by multiple Schools of Psychology in different Universities around the world.

The present study investigated the mediating role of a sense of belonging in relations between workplace sexism and (a) mental health and (b) job satisfaction. Participants were 190 women from...mainly male-dominated jobs. They completed an online survey that contained measures of sexism, sense of belonging in the industry, mental health, and job satisfaction. (Rubin, Paolini, Subašić, & Giacomini, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, p267)

This study hypothesized that sexism directly impacts the sense of belonging and will affect mental health and job satisfaction. What was discovered was that women who represent the minority of their company face sexism and will develop feelings of loneliness and alienation. This results in a decrease in sense of belonging that will lead to a higher risk for poor mental health and less likelihood of being satisfied with the job.

Another challenge a woman faces when entering a male-dominated occupation is the next type of segregation called vertical segregation. This form reflects the view...

That women have fundamentally different capabilities, skills, and emotional strengths than men do, and are therefore suited to different work...This sort of segregation stems from that men's capabilities, skills, and strengths qualify them for more authoritative and more responsible positions than women (Charles & Grusky, *Women in Business*, p24). This view is developed by stereotypes that are caused by these dissimilarities between men and women such as differences in reproductive organs and physical appearance. Stereotypes created social rules on how one should look, behave, feel, and be perceived. These rules have served as a huge injustice to women and created a patriarchal structured society, as it ruled men as the strong leader and protectors of the timid women who "can't take care of

themselves”. This historical view proves that in a corporation, men are the best fit for managerial positions due to their natural characteristics to protect and lead, while women follow.

Vertical segregation and these stereotypes are harmful to a female’s professional life because it blocks her improvement in her career due to the false view that women are physically nonthreatening, nonassertive, and too nurturing to be a good fit in a managerial position. In promotion selection, few women are deemed eligible as candidates for a management or board role, as recruiters are plagued by this old view. Even talented hardworking women are not being recognized for promotions as multiple surveys have displayed that they feel that they are being over-mentored and under-sponsored, meaning that they receive guidance to gain higher level positions through mentoring but are not getting promoted as often or as fast as men. This becomes discouraging to these women who work hard but never see the reward. Women become unmotivated to share their talent with a business that overlooks them, resulting in low performance and higher turnover.

Vertical segregation causes female employees to be ignored by managers and coworkers. The educational level seems to have an impact on how much this can affect their professional and ultimately their mental and physical well-being. A study that collected and analyzed data from the General Social Surveys, to find if vertical segregation/ discrimination causes a decline in women’s physical and mental health. Through this study, their “analyses show that women with high levels of education are more likely than women with lower levels of education to work full-time and in well-compensated, male-dominated occupations, and it is in these contexts where women are most likely to perceive gender discrimination (Andersson & Harnois, *Social Science & Medicine*).” This means that women with high education are more likely to face gender discrimination because they usually work in male occupations. In these occupations, highly educated women are treated as if they did not go through the same schooling and need to prove to themselves that they deserve a higher position or to be hired in a field.

Discrimination faced by women with lower education in male-dominated occupations seems to be impacted the most mentally and physically. These negative consequences on their mental and physical health include, “...lower quality sleep, less happiness, and lower job satisfaction (Andersson & Harnois, *Social Science & Medicine*).” It is believed that

lower-educated women in these fields are more prone to these negative impacts because they are viewed and treated as unintelligent and are overlooked due to them not receiving higher education. This poor treatment may be received both inside and outside the organization, which will cause a decline in life happiness and confidence. Nonetheless, for both higher and lower-educated women, vertical segregation will cause a lack of organizational recognition and will prevent career improvement, which will over time lead to negative consequences in one's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being.

The next form of discrimination branches off from vertical segregation and is known as the glass ceiling effect. This is the practice of an organization to keep men in the business hierarchy by enabling women's improvement and promotion. The actual definition of the glass ceiling is it is "an invisible or unspoken barrier to the advancement of women beyond a certain level of authority, responsibility, and pay a job classification that is not horizontally segregated (Reeves, *Women in Business*, p25)." This invisible barrier reinforces vertical segregation in an organization by preventing skilled female and minority workers from gaining management positions and career progression. Women in the corporate world are the minorities in their organization and face the effects of this transparent ceiling by preventing any improvement to be made and making it nearly impossible for women to achieve promotions to managerial positions.

The effects of the glass ceiling are demonstrated by the unbalance in management, that is displayed by the small percentage of female managers in the workforce. These percentages are 40% of female managers and 60% of male managers. 40% versus 60% does not seem like a huge difference, but in this time of age, it should be at least 50/50. These percentages have been discovered by a study performed by several University Economic Departments in the United States and Europe, that used mathematical theorems to see how the glass ceiling effect promotion outcomes. To calculate how the glass ceiling effect took place during the promotion process, they "look at three different indexes of the gender gap: (i) the percentage of women at each hierarchical level, (ii) the odds of reaching a given level for men and women, and (iii) the odds ratio of female and male promotion at each level (Espinosa & Ferreira, *Journal of Applied Economics*, p38)." What was established was that men favored all the ratios and that gender bias reinforced the glass ceiling effect, which is why there is low female representation in corporate leadership. On the good side, it was found that these

biases have decreased over time, but men still make up most of the higher-level managerial staff and the promotion given to women is lower management or a position that "fits their capabilities."

Women are more than capable of successfully leading but male-influenced workplace policies reinforce the glass ceiling by solidifying female stereotypes or biases. These societal stereotypes lead corporations and colleagues to believe that a female is unfit for a managerial position, which was stated in vertical segregation. Regarding leadership, the leading stereotype that occurs in the workforce is that a female's chief duty is to be a wife, mother, and do household work, while males have the leadership and authority over the family. Even today in progressive nations, these stereotypes are believed, and it is shown by society still expecting them to do those activities and gives them a lower position to be able to achieve those household duties. Male-influenced policies and practices in the workplace still carry the traditional view that women are innocent housewives that cannot handle the business world even though women do have the capability to successfully lead. The reason for this is the social role theory, which is men and women adhering to societal roles that they learned in childhood. This theory supports this historical view and makes people inherently believe something that may not be true that will consequentially favor men to be promoted and paid more to support the old bias that they are the key breadwinners taking care of their wives and children.

The glass ceiling affects all women, but it seems to impact working mothers the most. This is shown through mothers not being able to gain promotions due to the historical view stated above. Executive board members and other higher-ups are usually made up of male senior employees, who believe that females with children do not prioritize their work. Mothers, especially new mothers, tend to take time off to care for their children. New mothers do receive benefits from organizations by giving them a minimum of 12 weeks of maternity leave. This is granted by the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA), an amendment to Title VII passed in 1978. This law "forbids employers to discriminate against a woman because of her pregnancy. This might occur by giving her a different job when she returns from maternity leave, by firing her when she discloses her pregnancy, or not rehiring her after maternity leave (Reeves, *Women in Business*, p54)." Even with this law in place, new mothers face the glass ceiling effect preventing them from reaching top positions because

they “should focus on their newborn” or because they missed certain opportunities when they were gone. This affects mothers with older children or large families as well because managers and other higher-ups assume they will not be reliable because there is more of a chance of family emergencies and events.

Organizations do understand that parents, male or female, need a healthy work-life balance by giving them flexibility in work hours, vacations, and deadlines and knowing the importance of taking leave for family events and emergencies. Especially after COVID-19 organizations have been more understanding due to the huge change in the work environment. This change has opened more options regarding where and when to work, which are working from home, fewer hours, or hybrid, working some days at home and some in the office. Mothers are taking advantage of these options to serve as a way for them to have a career while also taking care of their families. This is not discouraged by corporations but may lead to some negative impacts. The glass ceiling effect will make executive members view them as less committed to work and will give them lower-paid positions and less of a chance for them to be promoted. This is aggravating for many working mothers because men who are fathers are not treated this way, so what makes them any different? It is also aggravating to them because they do care about their careers, which is why they may compromise their role as mothers to work. Some mothers who work in corporations have a high work imbalance because they fear they will fall behind on the promotion line. This imbalance will lead to a decrease in time to complete tasks, commitment, energy, satisfaction, and involvement in any role they have.

Based on vertical segregation, the glass ceiling leads to women being ignored in the workplace because of women's behavioral bias. To not be ignored and hopefully gain a promotion, some women strip themselves from any woman-like qualities, especially women of color. In a study executed by Columbia University, it was found that women tend to hide their feminine qualities to fit in or seem like equals to the men in the corporation. This affects their confidence level, self-esteem, and stress, and may lose their personality and identity when hiding who they are. It also hinders their womanist or feminist attitudes, which is the belief and fight for women's equality. If these attitudes were not hindered, then it may lead to the shattering of the glass ceiling and to “...weaken the direct association of workplace discrimination with psychological distress (Velez, Cox, Polihronakis, & Moradi, *Journal of*

Counseling Psychology, 178).” However, women do not want to risk losing their job and having little support, so women hide their feminist attitudes.

The glass ceiling affects all women professionally, psychologically, and physically, no matter what race. Recent studies have examined this, such as one performed by the University of Wisconsin. “This study examined the association between perceived discrimination, workplace racial composition, and three outcomes—psychological distress, life dissatisfaction, and job dissatisfaction—among a sample of Black (n = 72) and White (n = 74) professional women (Maddox, *Women & Health*, p706).” They discovered if the workplace is the reason for these negativities in mental health and well-being by surveying a group of professional women and a group of nonprofessional women. What was found supports the claim because professional women of all races do have more psychological distress, life dissatisfaction, and job dissatisfaction than nonprofessional women because of the lack of promotion and being overlooked by the company. This study also discovered that the glass ceiling may psychologically affect one race more than the other, through the detection that white women were more prone to psychological distress when facing gender discrimination and being negatively affected by the glass ceiling effect. This was interpreted that black women are more adaptive to the stress of being placed at a disadvantage because sadly they have faced discrimination based on their race since childhood. White women may not witness discrimination until they enter the working world which may come as a shock and may result in an increase in stress and poor mental health. Either way, women of all races who experience the effects of the glass ceiling bear psychological and physical consequences.

Sexual Harassment is another form of discrimination and was ruled a discriminatory act in 1970 by the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The legal definition of sexual harassment is, “any conduct, gesture, comment, or sexual contact that is likely to cause offense to any employee, male or female, or be perceived by the employee to place a condition of a sexual nature on employment or any opportunity for training, job assignment, or promotion (Coelho, *Women in Business*, p239).” A reason why women face sexual harassment in the workforce is because of the patriarchy theory. This is viewed as the central cause of discriminatory actions especially sexual harassment as it is the fact that men always attempt to hold power in social, political, and domestic spheres. Now that women have entered and gained control in

these spheres, the patriarchy has become threatened. To maintain power and "put women in their place" some men act on their instincts, aggression, and strength. The biological want for dominance leads to men verbally and physically harming women to maintain their control.

There are different levels and forms of how sexual harassment that can occur in society and the workforce. There are three different forms an individual can harass a coworker: verbal, physical, or written. Verbal harassment consists of sexual innuendos, sexist remarks on an individual's body or clothing, and jokes of sexual nature. Physical harassment includes grabbing or groping a person, staring at one's private areas, offensive gestures, and the more extreme sexual assault and rape. Lastly, written forms can be displayed by sending explicit emails or pictures. There are three different types of sexual harassment gender-based harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender-based harassment is experiencing unwelcomed conduct based on their sex. Unwanted sexual attention is experiencing behaviors like touching without permission. These unwanted behaviors lead to fear and stress as they can range from name-calling to sexual assault or rape. Lastly, sexual coercion is being influenced or pressured by someone in the workplace to agree to have sex with them. These actions can be directed towards an individual or an entire workplace. No matter what type or form a woman faces in the workplace it still undermines their professional abilities and declines their mental and physical health. After facing any sort of harassment by a coworker in the workforce, one usually is uncomfortable working alongside that individual. This creates a hostile work environment; the actions of coworkers or managers negatively impact an employee's ability to do their job effectively. This environment leads to stress and discomfort, which will chain react to a decline in satisfaction and commitment to the job. The feeling of discomfort is through the fear and avoidance of the harasser. Some who feel so uncomfortable to the point they feel unsafe or cannot focus on work tend to withdraw from their position or quit their job altogether.

Why do women just suffer through these behaviors or quit? A study performed by the National Academies sent a series of surveys to female corporate workers about sexual harassment. This study was unpredictable because many women are reluctant to respond to a task that involves the topic of sexual harassment as they do not want to admit themselves as a victim as it may be humiliating and traumatizing. Also, working women always try to seem strong because they do not want to fall into gender biases. This survey displayed that women

who face sexual harassment usually do not report it because they believe that the procedures will favor the institution over the individual. Formal reports are the last resort as they fear blame, disbelief, humiliation, and damage to their career reputation. Instead of reporting they usually detach themselves psychologically, avoid the harasser, suffer through the situation without trying to avoid it, or appease their harasser by making up excuses for their behaviors, just out of fear of losing their job. All these reasons are a way for them to keep the focus on their career to survive as jobs are necessary for survival, which leads to some women risking their mental health.

Experiencing and suffering this harassment takes a toll on these women and consequentially gains negative psychological outcomes such as negative mood, fear, eating disorders, and self-blame which results in low self-esteem, increase use of prescribed drugs, anger, low life satisfaction, anxiety, and depression. A study that meta-analyzed data from 41 other studies, demonstrates the psychological and physical harm of sexual harassment in a corporation on women. This data analysis discovered that a traumatic experience “may lead to the physical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some studies have used screening instruments from the crime-related PTSD measures to evaluate the psychological and physical consequences of SH as traumatic experiences (Willness, Steel, & Lee, *Personnel Psychology*, p 138).” Women who do suffer from PTSD experience symptoms including emotional numbing, flashbacks, and sleep disturbance. On top of that women who experience sexual harassment may hurt their physical health, such as nausea, headaches, shortness of breath, and exhaustion.

In conclusion, gender discrimination comes in different forms such as segregation, the glass ceiling effect, and sexual harassment. They are all proven to negatively impact a women's career by either accepting them in lower economic standing occupations, discouraging them to join male industries, ruling them unable to lead, ignoring their work, preventing improvement, or creating a hostile work environment for them. These impacts on a career may lead women to have poor mental and physical well-being such as lower quality sleep, low job satisfaction, increase in stroke, high blood pressure, increase in cardiovascular disease, morbidity, anxiety, depression, burnout, lack of confidence, and even PTSD. These discoveries addressed through this paper support the claim that gender discrimination in the

workplace negatively affects women's professional lives and consequently affects them psychologically and physically.

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