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# Discriminatory practices against women in business organizations

## Praktyki dyskryminacyjne wobec kobiet w organizacjach biznesowych

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### Introduction

Discrimination is an event in which a person is treated unfairly because of their characteristics or ethnicity. It may be based on a person's race, sex, age, marital status, or any feature which creates a distinction between a discriminated person and those who discriminate. Discriminatory practices can be either transparent or appear in a hidden form. The culture of the country may have a huge influence on the treatment of certain groups. For instance, in Syria, women are still depended on their fathers or male partners and are not protected from gender-based discrimination<sup>1</sup>.

Unfair treatment can also be noticed in a professional environment. In business organizations, women may be subject to discrimination only because of their biological features. Stereotypes and pre-assigned gender roles may result in differences that can be considered inappropriate for female employees. Women in the U.S. still earn around 20 percent less than their male co-workers<sup>2</sup> and are provided with fewer workplace opportunities.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Bellafronto (2005) *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa – Syria*. Freedom House, October 2014.

<sup>2</sup> S. Carter, *The gender pay gap in the US is still 20 percent – but millennial women are closing it on men*. Make it, CNBC, August 2017.

Regardless of the roots and severity of discriminatory acts, it is the role of each citizen to prevent unfair treatment and contribute to diminishing the scale of discriminatory practices.

The aim of the dissertation<sup>3</sup> was to analyse the topic of discrimination against women in the workplace drawing on empirical and theoretical research. The dissertation contained a comparison of women's various experiences based on their stories. It also included a survey which was conducted among women. It sought to explore the scope and types of gender-based discrimination in the workplace. The main hypothesis was that discriminatory practices against women in the workplace result from the assumption that females, due to their biological and cultural features, are not capable of performing the same job as effectively as males. The research aimed to explore whether this assumption proves to be true.

## The concept of discrimination

To be fully able to participate in minimising the occurrence of discriminatory practices, people need to understand what discrimination itself is. Nonetheless, it is extremely hard to find one definition that describes discrimination succinctly and precisely due to its complexity. There are several types and categories within the phenomenon of discrimination. Each country in their internal legislation should describe the practices that are considered as violating people's rights as well as identify the grounds on which discriminatory acts might be performed. Wouter Vandenhole<sup>4</sup> stated that “[t]here is no universally accepted definition of discrimination, or equality”. Even international and fundamental human right documents, as Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>5</sup> as well as the core UN human rights treaties, do not provide the readers with a common definition of discrimination. Instead, it emphasizes that all people should be free from discriminatory practices and prejudice and should have an opportunity to live in an equal environment without violence. That is why it might appear easier to find a definition of discrimination which describes a particular ground on which unfair act was based, than a one universal explanation of the phenomenon of discrimination.

What determines people's prejudice towards others might be the society that they were raised in and the stereotypes they have been exposed to. Additionally, media, the Internet, and its way of conveying information about minorities and social groups may indeed persuade some people to perform discriminatory acts against another person. Personal features of the ‘aggressor’ may also be the reason for unfair and violent behaviour and can lead not only to discrimination but also to hate crime. These features can be for instance the vulnerability of the person, need for power and domination, their fear of appearing weak or fear of the unknown.

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<sup>3</sup> Dissertation written under the supervision of dr hab. Edyta Pietrzak, prof. PŁ and Nina Szczygiel, PhD.

<sup>4</sup> W. Vandenhole, *Non-discrimination and Equality in the View of the UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies*, Intersentia, Antwerpen, 2005, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations, 1948. Available at: [www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf](http://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf).

## Gender discrimination and its consequences

While there are many grounds on which discrimination can be based, a person's gender shall be enlisted among the most common ones. According to European Institute for Gender Equality<sup>6</sup>, gender discrimination should be defined as 'distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex'. This behaviour is aimed to diminish someone's efforts, recognition and to make it less enjoyable, for instance for women, to perform certain tasks. Gender discrimination ignores the right to equality and respect and interferes with basic human rights assigned to each person in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. According to United Nation Development Programme<sup>7</sup> women all over the world still face difficulties to gain the same access as male representatives to satisfying job positions and are not treated equally to male co-workers in processes connected with making decisions within business organizations.

Although women are capable of performing the same tasks in an equally satisfying way as men, they are not provided with many tools to combine their family and work life in a healthy way. It is the system that often discourages women from trying to achieve more and go for leading business positions. Women often face difficulties with combining their work schedule with their children's school schedule. Many employers do not consider employees' home responsibilities while creating work schedules and as a result superior might even unconsciously discriminate against women and make it impossible for them to perform both work and family responsibilities. Discriminatory acts against women can also take the form of undermining their intelligence and competences. In the work environment, they may encounter situations in which job performance is attributed mostly to someone's gender instead of qualifications and experience. Lawrence Swim et al.'s<sup>8</sup> study allowed them to conclude when a male employee's performance results in failure, society attributes it to bad luck or low effort of the individual. Whereas, in the case of women's failure, it was associated with the difficulty of the task.

Women, who are prone to workplace discrimination due to their biological sex, may suffer multiple mental and physical consequences which derive from their supervisors and co-workers' discriminatory acts against them. Tinuke Fapohunda<sup>9</sup> stated that the glass ceiling and inequalities in companies may cause a reduction of female's self-esteem and exaggerated emotions. The disparities in job promotion opportunities, as well as different treatment of women and men who have offspring may also have a significant influence on employee's well-being. Fapohunda claimed that it is often harder for women to achieve satisfying work-life balance which results in them not performing any of family and

<sup>6</sup> *Gender discrimination*. European Institute for Gender Equality.

<sup>7</sup> *Women still earn 24 percent less than men, 20 years on*. United Nations Development Programme, May 2015.

<sup>8</sup> J. Swim, L.J. Sanna, *He's Skilled, She's Lucky: A Meta-Analysis of Observers' Attributions for Women's and Men's Successes and Failures*. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, May 1996, vol. 22(5), pp. 507–519.

<sup>9</sup> T. Fapohunda, *The Glass Ceiling and Women's Career Advancement*, "BVIMSR Journal of Management Research", April 2018, Vol. 10, Issue. 1, p. 28.

work-related tasks efficiently enough. Magdalena Musiał-Karg<sup>10</sup> addressed women's situation in the Polish labour market and noticed that patriarchy has still a big impact on the possibilities of women's employment and promotion. The stereotypes and gender roles which are assigned to females since their birth may affect their professional life and make it tougher for them to get a job position that complements with their qualifications.

## The glass-ceiling phenomenon

While women may experience less discrimination today in comparison with the 20th century, they still need to struggle to maintain their positions in business organizations and have the same recognition of their daily responsibilities as males. Despite more possibilities for women to flourish in the business environment, they still encounter obstacles that may make it impossible for them to achieve all of their job-related goals. What is often considered to be the main reason for gender inequalities in the workplace is the glass ceiling. The term was coined by Hymowitz and Schellhardt<sup>11</sup> in the article for Wall Street Journal. Usha Kiran Rai et al.<sup>12</sup> defined the glass ceiling as events in which a person with high qualifications and experience is being denied the opportunity of promotion to the higher level of the corporate ladder, due to different discriminatory acts, which are commonly sexism or racism. This situation, in most cases, refers to women who are taking part in the recruitment process for executive levels of an organization. It is often the case that organizations focus more on stressing the negative effects of glass-ceiling for the company than looking for the roots of its occurrence. Neglecting the existence of barriers and not paying enough attention to guaranteeing the prevention of unequal treatment might lead to an even more significant number of discriminatory practices towards members of minorities and representatives of a certain gender.

## Survey on discrimination against women in the workplace and its results

The survey was conducted online in the period between 5th of May and 20th of May 2021. It was available in two language versions – English and Polish so it could reach more potential respondents. The media, through which the survey was distributed, were Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and e-mail addresses. The target group of the conducted research included women over 18 years old and were or had ever been professionally active. The questionnaire took approximately 10 minutes to fulfil and was answered by

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<sup>10</sup> M. Musiał-Karg M., *Kobiety na rynku pracy – analiza uwarunkowań*, „Czasopismo Naukowe Instytutu Studiów Kobietych” 2017, Issue 2(3), p. 125.

<sup>11</sup> C. Hymowitz, T.D. Schellhardt, *The glass ceiling: why women can't break the invisible barrier that blocks them from top jobs*. “The Wall Street Journal”, March 1986.

<sup>12</sup> U. Rai, M. Srivastava (2010), *Women Executives and the Glass Ceiling: Myths and Mysteries from Razia Sultana to Hillary Clinton*. BHU Management Review, 2010, Vol.1, Issue 2, p. 2. Available at: [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2232118](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2232118).

92 respondents. It contained 11 questions. What can be concluded from the obtained results is that although the phenomenon of discrimination is still present in the workplace, its rate might prove to be less alarming than primarily assumed. 89% of women claimed that they have equal opportunities in the workplace in most cases. Furthermore, 32% of women who participated in the survey have ever been subject to any type of discriminatory behaviour. Another conclusion that can be drawn from the results is that discrimination against women comes in most cases from other genders and is motivated by women's sex or age. Therefore, it can be noticed that biological features of women and the characteristics on which females do not have any influence, might still cause them to be excluded from the work culture and result in harassment, trauma, and lack of motivation for professional development. Should all genders acknowledge that biological differences create a diversified work environment, they may seek to avoid committing acts of discrimination based on someone's sex. Furthermore, to increase women's willingness to fight discrimination and report discriminatory acts, business organizations should focus on creating a trustful rapport between employees and their managers/supervisors since the lack of trust between these individuals was chosen as the main reasons for resigning from reporting discrimination. Companies might not have created an understandable and easy system of reporting discriminatory acts which was indicated by the results. Many women claimed that they did not have any opportunity to communicate about encountered inequality or did not know how to do it. If enterprises pay more attention to formal aspects of reducing discrimination and give women a safe way of reporting those bothering situations, they will also create a more open environment.

## General conclusions

The conclusion of the dissertation is that women might be the subjects of workplace discrimination due to their cultural and biological features. Though discrimination itself is hard to define, there is much evidence that female employees suffer from unequal treatment. It can be caused by employers' prejudice, by the assumption that the female sex is less capable of performing their tasks thoroughly and satisfyingly or by stereotypes that are still very visible in many cultures. Moreover, female employees may also be given fewer promotion opportunities and fewer chances for self-development in the workplace which can be motivated by the hurtful assumption that they are inefficient compared with men. Statistics prove that a gender pay gap still exists both in the United States and across Europe and may make it harder for women to obtain a satisfying level of financial remuneration. Women who faced discrimination, may feel insignificant, have depression episodes, get addicted to certain substances or even feel suicidal. Nevertheless, some tools should make it easier for companies to diminish discriminatory acts within the company. The means include providing employees with appropriate training about the phenomenon, preventing it, creating an intuitive and a formal procedure of reporting discriminatory acts, and supporting the victim after this traumatic experience. What is more, if employers monitor the social situation within the business organization, the scale of discriminatory acts will

be reduced. If due to prejudice or stereotypes, workers are denied equal opportunities or opportunities for promotion and development, the employer should be held accountable. If appropriate procedures of preventing and fighting discrimination are introduced into every company, the number of discriminatory practices should decrease and therefore result in creating a more open-minded and friendly work environment.

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