

The Impact of Workplace Gender Discrimination on Women's Professional Identity and Psychological Adjustment Mechanisms

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Abstract. Gender discrimination against women is still highly common in today's workplaces, greatly getting in the way of their career development. This research focuses on two main questions. First, how this discrimination shapes women's understanding of their own careers—what we call “professional identity”. Second, what psychological strategies women use to deal with such unfair treatment. To answer these questions, the research looks at real cases from fields like STEM, nursing and construction, and also reviews relevant research literature. Through this analysis, the paper looks at how discrimination affects women's work attitudes. It also examines how women view their own professional value and what their career goals are. At the same time, the paper lists common ways women adjust psychologically. For example, asking others for help, getting better at their professional skills and managing emotions. Also, another important finding is that workplace gender discrimination affects women differently in diverse industries. Recognizing this difference is very important for creating targeted solutions to fix the problem. In the end, we hope this study can give useful ideas for making women's workplaces better. It can also help enhance their sense of belonging to their professions and promote more gender equality at work.

Keywords: Workplace gender discrimination, Women, Professional identity, Psychological adjustment

1. Introduction

In modern society, people widely support gender equality. But women still face obvious unfair treatment at work. For example, when women look for jobs, some companies ask if they're married or have children. A few even turn down female applicants just for these reasons. When it comes to moving up in their careers, women have more trouble than men getting higher positions. The number of women in senior management roles is also clearly lower. These situations not only hold back women's career development but also go against the fairness principle that society tries to keep. Some prior studies have already talked about the forms of gender discrimination in the workplace and its influence on women's work. However, research on how such discrimination specifically affects women's recognition of their own careers and how women adjust their psychological states. However, research on how such discrimination specifically affects women's recognition of their own

careers and how women adjust their psychological states when encountering discrimination is not yet in-depth enough.

Therefore, this article selects to study the impact of workplace gender discrimination on women's professional identity and psychological adjustment mechanisms, hoping to supplement the insufficiency of research in this area, enable people to better understand the difficulties women encounter at work, and thereby contribute to improving the workplace environment.

2. The current situation of occupational discrimination

Workplace gender discrimination manifests in multiple dimensions, as detailed below.

2.1. Recruitment and work arrangement

This section must be in one column. Some enterprises impose implicit restrictions on women and are reluctant to provide them with equal opportunities—particularly rejecting women who are pregnant or of childbearing age. In work scheduling, women may also be assigned secondary tasks due to gender bias [1]. For instance, in the recruitment of technical positions in the Internet industry, some companies quietly label vacancies as "male-preferred" during resume screening. Even if female candidates have the same technical skills and project experience as male ones, companies often leave them off interview lists. They worry that "possible maternity leave might disrupt work progress". In traditional factories, female workers usually get low-skill tasks. These include sorting on assembly lines or checking products. Male workers, though, are more likely to get core tasks. These tasks are things like fixing equipment and improving work processes. These roles help them build skills and advance their careers better. These hidden restrictions and unfair task assignments mean women can't start their careers on the same level as men.

2.2. Industry-specific characteristic

Nursing industry: Women face career limitations and discrimination with strong professional characteristics [2]. Although over 80% of nursing practitioners are women, men hold more than 60% of management positions (nursing department directors, head nurses) in many hospitals. Female nurses with extensive clinical experience often require twice as long as their male counterparts to be promoted to management roles and are frequently dismissed as "only suitable for bedside care", excluding them from key work such as nursing management and policy formulation.

STEM fields: "Gender microaggressions" are widespread, including neglect or questioning in daily interactions [3]. For example, during project meetings, female engineers may have their speeches repeatedly interrupted when proposing new technical improvement plans; in subsequent discussions, their plans are often ignored in favor of similar proposals by male colleagues. When applying for research funding, female researchers' project proposals are more likely to be challenged on "feasibility", even if their data and innovation are comparable to those of male researchers.

Construction industry: Women in trades and semi-skilled roles still confront deep-rooted gender bias [4]. Female carpenters or electricians frequently hear remarks like "women lack the strength to carry tools" from male colleagues. Male foremen usually give high-paying core tasks—like installing main structures—to men. Women, though, only get auxiliary work, such as carrying materials and cleaning the site. What's more, female construction workers are rarely asked to join after-work technical meetings or job recommendation events. This stops them from expanding their professional connections and getting promotion chances.

2.3. Promotion and salary

Women have fewer opportunities for promotion than men and face greater difficulties in entering senior management positions, resulting in a significantly lower proportion of women in corporate leadership. The phenomenon of "equal work but unequal pay" persists across multiple fields, reflecting implicit undervaluation of women's work [5]. Notably, such disparities not only affect women's current career status but also influence their long-term employment schedules—discriminatory policies may force them to accept flexible or part-time roles that align with traditional gender expectations, further narrowing their career paths [6]. For example:

In the financial industry, among investment consultants with 5 years of experience and similar performance (annual sales difference within 5%), 35% of men are promoted to team managers, compared to only 15% of women. For those in the same team manager position, men earn an average annual salary of \$85,000, while women earn only \$72,000.

In the media industry, female editors responsible for the same columns and with the same number of published articles as male editors typically receive 12% less in quarterly performance bonuses.

These disparities in promotion opportunities and salaries not only make women feel their work value is unrecognized but also reinforce gender inequality in the workplace.

3. Consequences of workplace gender discrimination

Workplace gender discrimination undermines women's recognition of their careers, leads them to feel their work value is unacknowledged, reduces their sense of professional belonging, and may even drive them to abandon their careers.

3.1. Impact on professional identity

Long-term exposure to discriminatory environments makes women prone to doubting their professional abilities and weakening their identification with their careers. Yang's research indicates that discrimination stemming from power imbalances directly impedes the development of women's professional identity and may even lead to self-restriction in career choices [7]. For example, a female product manager at a technology company was repeatedly told by her supervisor that "women lack sensitivity to user needs for technical products" during work reports. Initially, she attempted to prove herself by optimizing product functions, but after several of her improvement plans were rejected (while similar plans by male colleagues were quickly approved), she gradually doubted her suitability for the role. Eventually, she abandoned her application for a senior product manager position and transferred to an administrative role with lower professional requirements. In the education industry, many female teachers with postgraduate degrees and rich teaching experience are reluctant to apply for high school teaching positions, as they frequently hear comments like "high school students have heavy workloads, and male teachers are more capable of handling the pressure of supplementary lessons and tutoring". Such self-restriction, induced by discrimination, narrows women's career development space.

3.2. Psychological impact

Prolonged exposure to such unfairness can cause anxiety, low self-confidence, and emotional suppression. A study of South Korean female employees found that workplace gender discrimination is significantly associated with depressive symptoms; if left unaddressed, this may negatively impact overall quality of life [8]. For instance:

A female salesperson at a cosmetics company was excluded from the core customer team for three consecutive quarters, as the sales director believed "women lack the aggressiveness needed to negotiate with major clients". Her sales performance consistently ranked at the bottom of the team, and she frequently received negative performance evaluations. Gradually, she became unwilling to communicate with colleagues, often stayed up late due to anxiety, and even developed thoughts of "not wanting to go to work at all". In daily life, she also grew more irritable, frequently quarreling with family over trivial matters and straining her once-harmonious family relationships.

A female researcher in a biological laboratory had her research results signed by her male supervisor as the first author without her consent. When she sought an explanation, the supervisor replied, "Women's research abilities are inferior to men's; being listed as the second author is a form of recognition for you". After this incident, she lost confidence in her research work and even wondered, "Maybe I really lack the talent for scientific research". She remained in a low mood for a long time, severely delaying her research progress.

3.3. Restrictions on career development

Discrimination deprives women of numerous growth opportunities, limiting their ability improvement and career path expansion. A meta-analysis by Triana et al. confirms this trend, noting that such restrictions are more pronounced in industries like STEM and construction, even affecting the overall development of female groups in these sectors [4, 9]. For example:

In STEM fields, female engineers rarely get chances to join large national projects. These projects not only offer enough funding and advanced technical support. They also help engineers gain useful experience and become more influential in the industry. Because female engineers don't have these chances, they find it hard to get better at their technical skills and build a good professional reputation. They fall far behind male engineers when it comes to promotion speed and career growth.

In the construction industry, female workers rarely access skill training and certification exams necessary for promotion. For example, training courses for "senior carpenter" and "senior electrician"—qualifications required for technical management roles—typically only recruit male workers. Without these certifications, female workers remain in entry-level positions long-term, earning approximately 30% less per month than male colleagues with the same years of experience. This not only hinders individual female workers' development but also leads to a shortage of female talent in mid-to-senior roles in the construction industry, undermining the industry's diversified development.

4. Countermeasures to address workplace gender discrimination

To deal with workplace gender discrimination, we can take targeted measures at the individual, enterprise and social levels.

4.1. Individual level

Women should proactively enhance their professional capabilities, clarify their rights and interests, and take initiative to fight for equality [10]. When facing psychological pressure, they can seek support from family and friends, engage in enjoyable activities to adjust their mood, or access social support (peer mutual assistance) to mitigate the erosion of negative emotions on their professional identity. For example:

Female employees in the legal industry can get better at their jobs by taking specialized training courses and getting professional certifications (intellectual property law, corporate law). If they face salary discrimination—earning less than male colleagues who do the same work—they can collect proof of their work. This includes the number of cases they've handled and their win rate. They can also get industry salary standards for the same position. Then they can talk to the company's HR department to get equal pay.

Female teachers who feel stressed because of discrimination can relax by reading professional books. They can also join teaching and research meetings or do sports (yoga, running). They can join "female teachers' mutual help groups" set up by the school too. These groups let them share work problems and learn good ways to cope from other teachers. For instance, if a female teacher is excluded from a key teaching and research group due to gender, other group members can help her organize her teaching achievements and recommend her for municipal teaching competitions, enabling her professional abilities to gain broader recognition.

4.2. Enterprise level

Enterprises should set up fair recruitment, promotion and salary systems. These systems can eliminate gender bias, promote gender equality and build an inclusive workplace culture. They should also make industry-specific improvement plans. For example, in STEM fields, they need to better identify and deal with "microaggressions" [3]. In the nursing industry, they should improve career development channels [2]. Specific measures include:

Recruitment: Companies should use "blind resume screening" to hide personal info like gender, age and marital status. They should evaluate candidates only based on professional qualifications—education, skills and work experience. For example, a Silicon Valley tech company used this method. It raised the share of female employees in technical positions from 18% to 32% in two years.

Promotion: Formulate clear, quantitative assessment criteria. In the sales industry, for example, promotion to sales manager should be based on indicators such as average monthly sales, customer satisfaction, and team collaboration scores—with the weight of each indicator publicly disclosed. Subjective factors like "gender" or "work style" should be excluded. In the nursing industry, hospitals can launch a "nursing management talent training program", selecting outstanding female nurses with over 5 years of clinical experience to participate in management training (hospital management, nursing quality control) and assigning them to temporary management roles (deputy head nurse) to accumulate experience and improve promotion prospects.

4.3. Social level

Society should strengthen the promotion of gender equality to raise awareness of women's workplace rights. Simultaneously, relevant regulations should be improved and supervision enhanced [5]. Attention should be paid to gender equality in emerging fields such as fintech, and efforts should be made to promote the coordinated development of technological progress and gender equality [11]. Additionally, stricter management and penalties for workplace gender discrimination are needed to protect women's career development. Specific actions include:

Advocacy: Governments can promote gender equality through public service advertisements on TV, subways, and other platforms, and organize "gender equality lectures" in communities and schools to challenge traditional notions that "men are the primary breadwinners and women are responsible for household affairs". For example, a Chinese government public service ad shows

female scientists developing new materials. It also shows female engineers building high-speed railways and female construction workers helping build bridges. This helps more people see women's great contributions in different industries.

Legal safeguards: Governments can revise labor laws. These laws should clearly ban gender restrictions in recruitment, promotion and salary. They should also stop companies from asking about women's marital status and childbearing plans. Governments should set up a special "workplace gender discrimination complaint hotline" and online platform. Labor supervision departments must investigate and solve complaints within 15 working days. Enterprises that seriously violate these regulations (arbitrarily rejecting female candidates, implementing obvious salary discrimination) should face fines, public exposure, and credit rating downgrades.

Emerging fields: In sectors like fintech, industry associations can develop a Fintech Industry Gender Equality Development Standard, requiring enterprises to ensure that women account for no less than 30% of technical and management positions and provide equal training and promotion opportunities for female employees. For example, a Shanghai fintech company established a "female technical talent scholarship" to support female college students majoring in finance and computer science, and reserved 40% of spots in its annual "core technology training camp" for female employees—effective

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the impact of workplace gender discrimination on women's professional identity and their psychological adjustment mechanisms. It systematically sorts out the manifestations of discrimination in recruitment, promotion, and salary—including hidden restrictions in recruitment, industry-specific bias, and disparities in promotion opportunities and salary levels. Additionally, this paper analyzes the negative effects of such discrimination: it undermines women's professional identity, leading to self-restriction in career choices; it causes psychological distress such as anxiety and low self-confidence, and may even induce depressive symptoms; it also deprives women of growth opportunities, limiting the improvement of their professional abilities and the expansion of their career paths, with more prominent impacts in industries such as STEM and construction. Countermeasures are proposed from three levels: Individuals should improve their professional skills. They should also ask for help actively to deal with psychological pressure. Enterprises need to set up fair systems and inclusive workplace cultures. They should make targeted improvement plans based on industry features. Society should promote gender equality more. It should improve related rules and strengthen supervision to stop discriminatory behaviors.

Research findings show that solving workplace gender discrimination and boosting women's professional identity needs joint efforts from individuals, enterprises and society. We should pay special attention to industry differences. For example, "microaggressions" are common in STEM fields, and there's obvious bias in the construction industry. Future research can further explore how women in different industries and regions adjust psychologically. This will help make more targeted solutions to improve gender discrimination at work and better protect women's career development rights.

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