

Exploring the Intersectionality of Race and Gender: Discrimination of Asian American Women in the Workforce

Yuhwa Nam

*Shanghai High School International Division, Shanghai, China
chelcheln2007@gmail.com*

Abstract. In the United States, Asian Americans are notably one of the fastest growing minority populations. Yet despite their high educational attainment and strong workforce participation, Asian Americans face a distinct bamboo ceiling. In particular, Asian American women, often face a pronounced pay gap and are prevented from climbing the career ladder, not only in comparison to their male counterparts but also relative to women of other racial groups. Consequently, they experience a distinct form of double discrimination: for being both a woman and as members of a racial minority. This study explores the intersectional stereotypes and structural barriers that Asian American women face through both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The analysis finds that Asian American women are often systematically disadvantaged by implicit bias and cultural stereotypes that restrict their leadership opportunities, create pay disparities, and foster unhealthy working environments. By utilizing both individual experiences and court cases as well as structural patterns, this paper brings to attention the need to better accommodate such unique forms of discrimination. Moreover, it offers recommendations to guide corporations and organizations toward equity and inclusion.

Keywords: Asian American women, workplace discrimination, bamboo ceiling

1. Introduction

Asian Americans are a growing population in the United States, constituting 7% of the U.S. population and reaching a new high of nearly 25 million people. Moreover, they are highly present in many professional fields [1]. They have been the largest racial minority group in major law firms and hold significant shares of STEM jobs. However, despite Asian Americans' growing presence in the workforce, they continue to face notable systemic barriers to advancement, particularly in the aspect of achieving leadership and executive roles [2].

In fact, although they were able to achieve becoming the largest minority group in leading law firms, they have the lowest partner-to-associate ratio in comparison to any other ethnic or racial group [3]. This pattern reflects the existence of the bamboo ceiling, where Asian Americans are seen as competent workers yet are excluded from leadership roles due to the prominent stereotype that portrays them as diligent yet lacking in charismatic and leadership qualities. Moreover, it is important to note that the issue notably affects women disproportionately, with the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) reportedly finding that in the fiscal year 2020, Asian Americans

were underrepresented among leadership roles compared to their representation in the Federal workforce, with 3.3 percent of Federal leaders being Asian American men and a lower 2.3 percent of Federal leaders being Asian American women [3].

These disparities stem from intersectional discrimination, the compounding effects of both racial and gender. The intersectionality framework, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her civil rights legal scholarship to clarify the distinct experiences of Black women, is vital to understanding how Asian American women's experiences are not fully captured by analyses of race or gender alone. Crenshaw argues that sexism and racism are not simply additive, but rather interlocking systems. For Asian American women, this means anti-Asian racism in the U.S. is inevitably intertwined with patriarchal stereotypes. For example, the submissive "lotus blossom" or the exotic "dragon lady" trope intertwines with the gender biases in the workplace, which often assume White norms of leadership. Thus, an Asian woman could be judged to be both too passive (failing to assert authority because she is a woman and stereotypically quiet as Asian) yet at the same time too aggressive (violating gender norms if assertive). This "double bind" can severely restrict professional opportunities. Through the lens of Asian American women, this paper examines how intersecting biases operate in the modern workplace [4].

This paper combines qualitative case study with quantitative data analysis to reveal both the lived experiences of Asian American women and the systematic discrimination that they face on a macro level. Firstly, the study will introduce and review the cultural stereotypes and implicit biases that specifically target Asian American women to provide a conceptual framework, drawing from existing scholarship and literature. These cases will not be treated as isolated incidents, but as representative examples that uncover broader structural patterns. Quantitative evidence on representation and pay gaps will be used to supplement the conclusions.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how intersecting biases shape the workplace experiences of Asian American women. Explicitly, the study asks: how do intersecting racial and gender biases shape the workplace experiences and career opportunities of Asian American women in US professional fields? By addressing this question through the qualitative study of landmark court cases and quantitative data on representation, the study aims to explore beyond independent anecdotes to demonstrate systematic patterns of discrimination. Moreover, the study will propose solutions in policy reforms and organizational practices to actively reduce the biases against Asian American women in the workplace.

2. Overview of stereotypes faced by Asian American women

2.1. Introduction and categories of stereotypes

Asian American women are forced to confront a complex web of cultural and gendered stereotypes that often undermine their opportunities and limit their chances at being promoted to higher levels in the federal and corporate workplace. The stereotypes they face can be grouped into three broad categories: the model minority myth, gendered expectations in the Asian cultural context, and the double-bind leadership tropes. While these categorizations may inevitably give rise to some unintended generalization, it serves as a useful and effective framework for understanding recurring barriers that shape Asian American women's professional experiences and challenges [5].

2.2. Model minority myth

Notably, ethnically Asian employees are held to a “model minority” stereotype, where they are perceived to be smart and hardworking yet unemotional and uncreative. A Pew Research center report, which received responses from over 7,000 Asian adults in the US, found that over 60% said that people in daily encounters assumed that they were good at math and science yet creative thinkers due to unconscious biases and perceptions. Even when partially positive, stereotypes can trap Asian women in support roles. When employers expect them to be diligent technicians but not visionaries or risktakers, diverse individuals can become constrained to narrow traits and prevented from advancing on the career ladder [6].

2.3. Gendered expectations in the Asian cultural context

On a cultural level, Asian women are often portrayed in contradictory roles that create conflicting expectations. A mixed method scoping review by Forbes et. al, White sexual imperialism created common cultural tropes to subjugate Asian American women in relation to white men. For example, the “dragon lady” stereotypes portray Asian American women to be hypersexual and deviant temptress; “lotus blossom baby” and “China doll” portray them to be desperate, hyperfeminine, and sexually servile. The racialized sexual objectification of Asian American women bleeds into the workplace. They are expected to be quiet and deferential, and if they deviate, they are often judged to be abrasive or unfeminine [7].

Even more so, Asian American women face additional stereotypes and barriers in their careers due their identity as a woman. According to Chin’s study, stereotypes of women “paint them as demure, acquiescent, and sometimes sexualized too – none of which are perceived as leadership traits,” further hindering their ability to climb the career ladder. As Asian American women are type casted to be competent yet obedient and quiet as an extension of the model minority stereotype, they are expected and assumed to behave in a certain manner that aligns with subordinate roles rather than assert themselves in positions of authority. The double layering of racial and gendered stereotypes results in their contributions being undervalued and their leadership potential being overlooked, creating structural inequities.

2.4. Tightrope of leadership

Moreover, women, and particularly women of color, are subjected to additional biases that bar them from advancing into leadership roles. According to the Society of Women Engineers, types of bias and discrimination include the Prove-it-again Bias and the Tightrope Bias. In fact, as outlined in the Prove-it-again bias, in comparison to 35% of white men, 61% of women have reported that they have to prove themselves repeatedly to obtain similar levels of respect and recognition as their colleagues. Moreover, the Tightrope Bias describe how women are more likely than white men to face pressure not to behave too assertively or show anger without consequences. In these aspects, Asian American women are provided with an even narrower of range of behavior that is seen as acceptable. They are literally forced to walk the corporate tightrope: they have to act assertive enough to prove themselves as a competent leader, yet not so assertive that they risk being labeled as hard to work with [8].

3. Qualitative analysis of workplace discrimination

3.1. Manifestation of the double-bind stereotype problem

Asian American women in male-dominated industries often face a double bind of contradictory expectations that limits their career advancement. The barriers faced by Asian American women in the workplace are exemplified by the Pao v. Kleiner Perkins case, which highlights how systemic discrimination and retaliation function even within elite industries. Ellen Pao filed a lawsuit against her employer Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers, a Silicon Valley-based tech venture capital firm, on the grounds of gender discrimination. Pao, an Asian American employee, had started to work at Kleiner Perkins in 2005 and became a junior investing partner, but was eventually passed over for a senior partner position and terminated despite outqualifying her fellow male and white colleagues [9]. Pao further claimed that she often experienced sexually harassment at the firm, were excluded from meetings by male partners, and that the firm lacked training and policies to prevent discrimination. Pao's experience highlights how workplace cultures and systemic barriers tolerate harassment and create spaces that are exclusionary towards women. Although Pao's case was focused on gender discrimination, her identity as an Asian American likely compounded her challenges she faced in achieving advancements despite her qualifications.

Moreover, the lack of an avenue to safely report and create meaningful change amplifies the problem. Attempts to improve the workplace conditions are even met with retaliation. Pao claimed that when she tried to promote improvements for the treatment of women within the firm through conversation in late 2011 and in an official memo in 2012, the firm retaliated by terminated her employment. Pao's case reveals that not only do women face institutional barriers in the workplace, but that they often lack the appropriate and safe measures to challenge or report discrimination in a manner that does not jeopardize their opportunities in their career. The absence of effective accountability measures puts the women who speak out at the risk of retaliation, creating a culture of silence and complicity. Additionally, Pao's performance reviews revealed contradictory criticisms of her being "too bold" and "too quiet." Such expectations make it nearly impossible for Asian American women to meet the elusive standards for advancement [10].

While Pao ultimately lost her lawsuit on March 17, 2015, the case nevertheless drew greater awareness toward the discrimination and the need for change. Within the court, the defense won the case by citing that Pao's negative performance reviews remained consistent through the years and therefore undermined her claims that she was denied promotion on the basis of gender discrimination. Yet Pao went on to start broader conversations about gender discrimination through interviews and published her book *Reset: My Fight for Inclusion and Lasting Change* to bring light to the lack of diversity accommodations in the tech industry and startup environment through her experiences. Thus, the legal battle was able to garner public attention to issues faced by women in male-dominated industries and served as a small first step in the fight against the "entrenched sexism and harassment and discrimination that plagues The Valley." The case also worked to reflect how gender bias and sexual harassment in the workplace are often incredibly difficult to prove in court. It exposed the holes and inadequacies of the current legal system, which fails to adequately protect victims and address structural discrimination [11].

3.2. Manifestation of the double-bind stereotype problem

The intersectionality of race and gender largely shapes the lived workplace experiences of Asian American women. The more recent 2022 case *Lee v. Portfolio LLC* further demonstrates the

presence of discrimination. On June 27, 2022, plaintiff Michelle Lee filed the lawsuit against her employer Portfolio Advisors LLC, a private equity firm in Connecticut, on the basis that “the firm and her managers discriminated against her over 15 years on the basis of her race, national origin, gender, and religion.” In accordance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, “employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin” is prohibited, ensuring that the categories addressed in Lee’s lawsuit are legally protected [12].

However, despite protected identities and objective qualifications, Asian American women are often face unfair barriers in advancing and climbing the social ladder. For one, although Michelle Lee is a Yale Law School graduate with multiple honors, have contributed to the firm for 15 years, and have received consistently excellent performance reviews, she was unable to advance within the firm or be promoted to senior management. Notably, other employees who were hired after her, especially in the demographic of white Mormon men, advanced to senior management positions and received a higher salary despite fulfilling less qualifications. The pattern of less-qualified white male colleagues being promoted over Lee demonstrates how entrenched stereotypes can actively disadvantage women of color, even when they possess higher merits and a proven track record [13].

Moreover, Lee’s experience in the corporate workplace environment corroborates Pao’s, demonstrating the entrenched systemic barriers faced by Asian American women. Lee was not only hindered from advancing in her career but she also “faced racist remarks, verbal abuse and profanity, the circulation of rumors about her cleanliness and sexual harassment by coworkers and supervisors.” Yet when she filed complaints, she was reflected negatively in performance reviews and tagged as being “difficult to work with.” This echoes how institutional culture and corporate systems silence Asian women, and women of color at large, by punishing them for speaking out, delegitimizing their grievances and allowing systemic biases to persist. Specifically, in the case for Asian American women, they face being stereotyped as passive and obedient due to their double identity of being both Asian and female, leading them to be seen negatively when they subvert these societal expectations by being assertive or taking on leadership positions. These intersecting forms of discrimination reduce Asian American women to worker-bee roles over leadership advancements, preventing their upward mobility in a corporate setting and devaluing their hard work.

3.3. Manifestation of the double-bind stereotype problem

Furthermore, the discrimination of Asian American of women is present even in agencies tasked with enforcing civil rights. For example, on August 2024, Uma Kandan, an Asian Indian female enforcement manager at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), filed the case Kandan v. Burrows in federal court. The plaintiff had worked at the EEOC for 24 years, alleged that her superiors systematically discriminated against her on the basis of gender, race, and national origin. Specifically, she claimed that while she was a concurrent enforcement manager, her boss “groomed and promoted” a less-experienced U.S.-born White male subordinate for the top role. In essence, Kandan’s lawsuit argues that the leaders of EEOC, precisely the agency responsible for enforcing Title VII, violates the very principles they are tasked with enforcing.

All three case studies reflect a distinct pattern: highly qualified Asian American women are denied professional opportunities due to intersecting racial and gender biases. In Kandan’s case in particular, she reports that the official in charge had a pattern of “promoting male employees over equally and/or more qualified female employees” and preferring U.S.-born Black men over female minorities. Like Lee, Kandan experienced retaliation after trying to overcome the discrimination within her company. After she filed internal complaints, her performance reports were downgraded, and she faced professional isolation. This reveals the need for organizations and corporations to

develop ways to properly and healthily handle employee complaints about inequality. Such foundations are crucial as a first step toward structural progress.

Furthermore, this case demonstrates that intersectional bias can occur even in supposedly egalitarian institutions. It further highlights how Asian women can be disadvantaged even when they are qualified and put in charge. An Asian American woman in management may be seen as inherently less promotable than any White man. However, in practice, plaintiffs like Pao, Lee, and Kandan need to allege multiple protected classes simultaneously, which is yet to be well equipped by the current legal system [14].

3.4. Intersectionality in STEM and other fields

Asian American women's intersectional barriers extend beyond just the corporate workplace, manifesting in challenges for Asian Americans in STEM careers. For engineers, scientists, and academics, racial stereotypes intertwine with gender expectations to further marginalize Asian American women. In a research paper conducted by Williams et. al., female and ethnically Asian scientists and engineers often face implicit bias at work and often must "walk a tightrope between being too feminine, so likable but not competent, and too masculine so competent but not likeable." The struggle comes from prescriptive stereotyping, where Asian women are expected to behave in a feminine and demure way, but being scientists means taking on masculine qualities, with women of Asian descent facing more pressure to behave femininely in comparison to white women. One Asian women geophysicist participating in the study noted, "Asians are supposed to be very passive. And when you add women to that, they really don't expect women to stand up for themselves, or they expect the dragon lady, the extreme opposite." The double-bind identities of Asian women place them in extremely narrow boundaries of acceptable behavior, illustrating how structural biases not only limit individual expression but also hinder professional development. Such experiences notably parallel to Asian American women in corporate jobs.

Quantitative data across fields reinforce this pattern of exclusion. For example, large tech firms often have Asian-majority engineering workforces, with over 30% of engineers at companies like Google or Microsoft being Asian. However, Asians occupy less than 15% of senior executive roles. In academia, similar trends appear. While Asian PhD students are well-represented, Asian women faculty and deans are rare. These wide disparities reflect how immigration histories and occupational segregation interact with bias. Although many new immigrant women work in undervalued jobs, and Asian women are overrepresented in low-wage sectors even as stereotypes claim they are "model minorities."

Moreover, Asian postdoc mothers in the STEM world face a notable "Maternal Wall" bias. As Asian people are stereotyped to be committed strongly to work, Asian women are less likely to given pregnancy accommodations or maternal leave compared to their white counterparts. This shows how even the positive stereotypes ascribed to Asian Americans could be exploited as a way to deny Asian women with the same flexibility and support, reinforcing systemic inequalities and reducing their space in the workplace [15].

4. Conclusion

Overall, both anecdotal accounts and large-scale studies demonstrate that Asian American women in STEM and professional fields must overcome layers of bias. Quantitative evidence from pay-gap analyses and workforce representation data confirms that even when education, qualifications, and working hours are held constant, Asian American women are still held back. These biases not only

undermine their professional progress, but also diminish the value of their talents and contributions, reducing years of hard work and dedication to nothing more than a stereotype.

In conclusion, the experiences of Asian American women in the United States workforce reveal how the intersection of race and gender creates unique and persistent barriers to upward mobility. These are not isolated incidents; they are part of a larger pattern driven by the “model minority” stereotype. While this stereotype may seem positive on the surface, it ultimately acts as a powerful tool of structural inequality. It confines Asian Americans to expected, rigid roles, silences their concerns, and discourages the recognition of discrimination. By casting them as hard-working but submissive, organizations and corporations place them in subordinate roles, limiting their access to leadership.

To dismantle these stereotypes and address systemic inequities in the workplace, we need both institutional accountability and cultural change. Organizations can start with practical solutions like comprehensive training for managers on implicit bias, cultural competency, and intersectionality. Additionally, workplaces must create clear and safe mechanisms for reporting discrimination, without fear of retaliation. Mentorship and sponsorship programs can also play a vital role in supporting the career advancement of Asian American women and other underrepresented employees. By addressing these deep-seated biases, companies can foster a more innovative and dynamic workforce, thus unlock the full potential of a diverse talent pool, which in turn helps their businesses flourish.

Ultimately, true changes require a broader cultural shift. Society must move past these harmful stereotypes and see Asian American women as individuals with skills, experiences, and ambitions, not as interchangeable figures within a so-called “model minority” myth. By building workplaces that value this complexity, everyone benefits. Organizations gain from fresh perspectives and stronger leadership, and Asian American women finally get the fair opportunity to thrive.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that the current research has important limitations. As much of the evidence is drawn from high-profile case studies and aggregate statistical data, it may not capture the full spectrum of experiences for all Asian American women. Additionally, it is important to further explore the intersecting factors of immigration status, generational differences, and class.

Consequently, further research should broaden its scope to include industry-specific analyses and conduct more comparative research across various racial and gender groups. Personal, qualitative methods, including interviews and surveys, could powerfully illuminate the everyday workplace experiences of Asian American women. By ensuring the inclusivity of Asian American women with different background, socioeconomic status, and work sectors, these research gaps can be closed. In this way, future scholarship could provide a far more nuanced, comprehensive understanding of these barriers and help add and refine policies aimed at equality and inclusion.

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