



Intersectional Barriers to Gender Inequality in the Workplace across Race and Disability

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Abstract

One phenomenon that has for long haunted workplaces is gender inequality despite the new push for diversity and inclusion. This qualitative work looks at how gender as well as other axes of differentiation like race, class, sexual orientation, and/or disability inform, constrain or produce employees' experiences of inequality in organizational environment. The study explores organisational factors that put up gender-based differences by focusing on structural relativity, cultural expectation, and polity. The study is based on 25 participants from different sectors, focus group interviews, and documents analysis. It will be shown that although most companies have diversity and inclusion policies in effect, these may not be effectively being practiced, and/or that there is a lack of policies that respond to the realities of multiply oppressed persons. Some few of the causes of this marginalization include cultural bias particularly from male dominated organizations. Furthermore, this paper reveals that current workplace policies are still lacking especially on subject like parental leave and promotion policies that continue to perpetuate gender stereotypes at the workplace. Finally, it is imperative for future scholarship to continue the important work of Choo and Diversifying Feminisms, insisting on an intersectional approach at the policy and cultural levels for organizations committed to addressing gender inequality in the workplace. Hence, the discovery advances the existing dialogue on workplace disparities and offer the appropriate guidelines for equality approaches across a range of organizations.

Introduction

Gender inequality in the workplace remains a pervasive and persistent issue across the globe, despite advancements in gender equality legislation and increased awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion. Women continue to face barriers in accessing leadership positions, encounter disparities in pay and benefits, and grapple with discriminatory practices and biases in hiring and promotion processes (King, 2020; Blell et al., 2023). While extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of gender inequality in the workplace, there remain unexplored areas that warrant further examination to comprehensively understand the complexities of this multifaceted phenomenon.

This study endeavours to contribute to the existing body of literature by delving into previously underexplored aspects of gender inequality in the workplace, specifically focusing on the intersectionality of gender with other social identities and its implications for organizational dynamics. Intersectionality, a concept pioneered by Preddie & Biernat (2021), highlights the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and disability, and underscores the importance of considering these intersecting identities in understanding experiences of oppression and privilege. While the concept of intersectionality

has gained prominence in feminist and critical race scholarship, its application to the study of gender inequality in organizational contexts remains relatively limited.

This study aims to address this gap by employing an intersectional framework to analyse how multiple dimensions of social identity intersect to shape individuals' experiences of gender inequality in the workplace (Williams et al., 2020; Baird et al., 2021). By adopting an intersectional lens, we seek to uncover the nuanced ways in which factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and disability intersect with gender to produce unique challenges and opportunities for individuals within organizational settings. Drawing on intersectionality theory, we aim to elucidate how intersecting forms of privilege and oppression operate within organizational structures and practices, influencing access to resources, opportunities for advancement, and experiences of discrimination and marginalization (Labelle, 2020; Annamma & Booker, 2020).

Moreover, this study seeks to explore the role of organizational culture and climate in perpetuating or challenging intersecting forms of inequality. Organizational culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices that shape the social environment within an organization, influencing patterns of behaviour, decision-making processes, and interactions among employees (Zeb et al., 2021; Alshammari, 2020; Thatcher et al., 2023). By examining the cultural dimensions of organizations through an intersectional lens, we aim to elucidate how dominant cultural narratives and practices may reinforce or challenge intersecting systems of oppression and privilege, ultimately shaping the experiences of individuals from diverse social backgrounds (Delucio & Villicana, 2021; Van et al., 2020).

Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to the development of practical interventions and strategies aimed at promoting gender equity and inclusion within organizational contexts. By identifying the intersecting barriers faced by individuals from marginalized social groups, we aim to inform the design and implementation of targeted interventions to address these barriers and create more inclusive work environments. This study recognizes the importance of collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in advancing gender equality initiatives and fostering organizational cultures that value diversity, equity, and inclusion (Bowditch et al., 2020; Cavioni et al., 2020).

Method

This study thus used qualitative research methodology in order to examine the gender aspects of inequality at the workplace. To achieve these objectives, the adopted approach was purposive in order to obtain thick descriptions of participants' experiences and the nature of injustice and oppression at the structural and cultural levels in organizational contexts. In this way, having integrated social identity as a complex concept into the research, the goals were to advance knowledge on how a number of privilege/oppression matrices interact in the organising of work.

Purposeful sampling was adopted and a target population of 25 participants was drawn based on organizational fields of thrust, for instance, corporate, health, education, and public services. In the sample, both rank-and-file workers and managers and supervisory personnel were selected so that diverse workplace experiences were captured. Subsampling based on gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and disability was used to explore the complexity of gender discrimination.

Data collection involved three primary methods: which includes; face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged between 60–90 minutes, and enabled the participants to provide experiences on the type of difficulties and obstacles encountered. Focus group discussions

allowed understanding common cultural and structural factors affecting gender relations, three FGDs included 5-7 participants. To support these methods, this study also examined official organizational documents, such as diversity policies and employee handbooks, to question and interpret the disparity between formal procedures and people's realities.

To analyse the collected data the method of open coding a qualitative data analysis method known as thematic analysis was employed. Interview transcripts and focus group recordings and review of any documents shared were first read by the authors to become more familiar with the content and then coded to get themes. Categorisation of data was done using NVivo software and the themes used include structural barriers and cultural practices, gendered practices, international and interprofessional discrepancy. Using the method of intersectionality, these themes showed how fluid categories of difference influenced people's experience at the workplace.

Result and Discussion

Employment discrimination against women remains a longstanding problem for various employees, including women of color and those from other vulnerable groups, as well as lesbians, and disabled people. However, organizational structures and corporate cultures still remain short of complexity and sensitivity of such forms of inequality. This paper seeks to establish how these intersecting identities manifest in gender workplace inequalities, in light of the structural and cultural factors inclusive of policies that still fuel injustices. Pursuing the intersectionality approach, this study aims at exploring the nature of interactions between multiple categories of social differentiation and understanding how these categories affect the lives of employees in the workplace. This multiple case study uses interview data, focus group discussions, and documents to offer fine-grained insight into the processes that shape and sustain gender inequality and inform strategies for intervention to promote greater equity in organizations.

Structural Barriers

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the data was the presence of structural barriers within organizations that perpetuate gender inequality. These barriers were embedded in the policies, practices, and hierarchies of the workplace, often functioning in ways that marginalized individuals with intersecting social identities. Participants frequently highlighted how formal mechanisms, such as recruitment processes, promotion criteria, and performance evaluations, failed to account for the unique challenges faced by women and other marginalized groups.

For instance, many participants noted that recruitment practices tended to prioritize male-dominated networks, inadvertently sidelining equally qualified female candidates. A female participant from the corporate sector expressed her frustration, saying,

"Most job postings seem like they are written with a man in mind. Even when I meet all the qualifications, I always feel like there's this unspoken bias that makes them choose a male candidate instead."

Similarly, promotion criteria often favored linear career trajectories, which disadvantaged women who had taken career breaks for caregiving responsibilities. A mid-level manager remarked,

"I was told I lacked continuity in my career because I took a year off for maternity leave. It didn't matter that my performance reviews were stellar before and after."

Another structural issue identified was the lack of transparency in performance evaluations and decision-making processes related to advancement. Participants described how subjective

criteria were frequently used to justify promotions, leaving room for biases to influence outcomes. One participant from the education sector shared,

"Promotions here depend on who you know rather than how well you perform. As a woman of color, I feel like I'm always overlooked, no matter how much extra work I do."

Such practices created significant disparities in career progression, particularly for women belonging to intersecting marginalized identities, such as race and socioeconomic status.

Organizational hierarchies also reinforced gender imbalances, with leadership positions overwhelmingly occupied by men. Several participants reported encountering a "glass ceiling" that hindered their upward mobility. A participant from public administration commented,

"Whenever I apply for senior roles, I'm told I don't have the 'right leadership style,' but what they really mean is I don't fit their idea of what a leader looks like usually a white man in a suit."

These hierarchical structures not only limited representation but also perpetuated a culture where discriminatory practices went unchallenged, further entrenching gender disparities.

By identifying these structural barriers, the study highlights the urgent need for organizations to adopt more inclusive policies and practices. Addressing these issues requires revising recruitment and promotion processes, increasing transparency in evaluations, and fostering organizational cultures that value diverse leadership styles and career trajectories.

Cultural Norms and Biases

Cultural norms and biases within organizations were identified as significant contributors to the perpetuation of gender inequality. These norms, often deeply ingrained in workplace culture, influenced how employees perceived gender roles, shaped interactions, and reinforced discriminatory practices. Participants consistently highlighted the presence of gendered expectations, where women were often assigned roles or tasks perceived as nurturing or administrative, regardless of their professional capabilities.

A participant from the healthcare sector observed,

"Whenever there's an event to organize or a team-building activity, it's always the women who are expected to take charge of the logistics, even when it's not part of their job description."

Similarly, in male-dominated industries, women reported being excluded from decision-making processes and key professional networks. As one engineer shared,

"They have these informal meetings after work at the pub. That's where a lot of decisions are made, but as a woman, I'm rarely invited it's like an unspoken boys' club."

These gendered practices reinforced workplace dynamics that marginalized women and limited their access to opportunities.

Another recurring theme was the prevalence of unconscious biases in interactions and evaluations. These biases often resulted in women being held to higher standards than their male counterparts. Participants reported receiving feedback that emphasized personality traits over competence. A mid-level manager recounted,

"I was told I needed to be more assertive to lead a team, but when I was assertive, they said I was too aggressive. It feels like I'm constantly walking a tightrope."

These contradictory expectations placed an undue burden on women, making it harder for them to navigate their professional roles effectively.

Participants also noted the role of cultural stereotypes in shaping perceptions of leadership. Many described how traditional views of leadership as inherently masculine limited their career progression. A participant from public administration explained,

"When they think of a leader, they think of someone loud and dominating, not someone collaborative or empathetic. That's why so many of us women get overlooked for promotions."

Such stereotypes not only hindered women's professional growth but also perpetuated a culture that undervalued diverse leadership styles.

The findings underscore the need for organizations to address these cultural norms and biases proactively. This can be achieved by fostering inclusive environments that challenge gendered expectations, implementing bias training for employees, and promoting leadership models that value diverse approaches. By addressing these cultural barriers, organizations can take meaningful steps toward creating equitable workplaces.

Employee Perceptions and Lived Experiences

The study revealed that employee perceptions and lived experiences of gender inequality were shaped by a combination of structural and cultural factors within organizations. Participants shared stories of feeling undervalued, overlooked, and excluded in their workplaces, often citing a disconnect between organizational policies promoting diversity and inclusion and their day-to-day realities. This disconnect was particularly pronounced among individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, such as race, disability, and socioeconomic status.

A participant from the corporate sector expressed frustration with tokenistic approaches to diversity, stating,

"They love to showcase women and minorities in their brochures and events, but when it comes to actually listening to us or giving us opportunities, it's a different story."

Similarly, another participant from public administration remarked,

"I've been in meetings where my ideas were dismissed until a male colleague repeated them. It's exhausting to constantly fight to be heard."

These perceptions underscored a sense of alienation among employees, who often felt that their contributions were undervalued or overshadowed by their male counterparts.

The lived experiences of participants also highlighted the emotional toll of navigating workplaces rife with inequality. Many women described the mental and emotional labor required to challenge biases and advocate for themselves in professional settings. A participant from the education sector shared,

"You have to work twice as hard to prove yourself, and even then, they find ways to undermine you. It's mentally draining, but if you don't push back, nothing changes."

Others reported feeling isolated, particularly in male-dominated industries, where they lacked access to mentorship or peer support.

Intersectionality played a significant role in shaping perceptions, as participants with overlapping marginalized identities faced compounded challenges. A Black female healthcare worker noted,

"I feel like I'm not just battling sexism but also racism. When I speak up, it's seen as being confrontational, while my male colleagues are seen as confident and assertive."

This experience of "double jeopardy" highlighted how intersecting identities amplified workplace inequities, creating unique barriers for individuals from underrepresented groups.

These findings emphasize the importance of addressing the disconnect between organizational policies and employee experiences. Organizations must actively engage with employees to understand their lived realities and implement measures to address inequities. Creating safe spaces for dialogue, providing mentorship opportunities, and fostering a culture of accountability are essential steps toward bridging the gap between policy and practice.

Role of Workplace Policies

Workplace policies play a crucial role in shaping organizational practices and addressing gender inequality. However, the study found that while many organizations have formal policies in place to promote gender equity, their implementation and effectiveness were often inconsistent. Participants frequently highlighted gaps between the stated objectives of policies and their tangible impact on workplace dynamics, particularly in terms of enforcement and accountability.

A participant from the corporate sector shared,

"Our company has a detailed diversity policy, but it's more of a checklist than a commitment. When issues arise, they're swept under the rug because addressing them might disrupt operations."

This sentiment was echoed by another participant in public administration, who remarked,

"We have an anti-discrimination policy, but I've seen cases of bias go unreported because employees don't trust the process. They fear retaliation or that nothing will come of it."

Such experiences indicated that policies, while well-intentioned, often lacked the robust mechanisms necessary to ensure their effective application and to build trust among employees.

The study also revealed that some workplace policies inadvertently reinforced gender inequalities rather than addressing them. Parental leave policies that disproportionately emphasized maternity leave without providing equitable options for paternity leave perpetuated traditional gender roles. A male participant from the healthcare sector observed,

"I wanted to take parental leave, but it wasn't encouraged, and I was told it might affect my career progression. This puts all the childcare burden on women by default."

This lack of support for shared caregiving responsibilities often hindered women's professional advancement while maintaining the status quo in workplace gender dynamics.

Moreover, participants highlighted the absence of targeted policies addressing intersectional challenges. While general diversity and inclusion policies were common, they often failed to account for the compounded experiences of individuals with intersecting identities. A participant with a disability recounted,

"I face challenges as a woman, but as someone with a disability, there's an added layer of exclusion. The policies don't address the unique barriers I encounter it's like I'm invisible in their strategy."

This lack of specificity in workplace policies left many employees feeling unsupported and overlooked.

The findings underline the necessity for organizations to not only implement inclusive workplace policies but also ensure their effective enforcement (Aboramadan et al., 2022). Comprehensive strategies that include regular audits, clear reporting mechanisms, and accountability structures are essential. Additionally, developing policies that address intersectional experiences and promote shared responsibilities, such as equitable parental leave, can help organizations move beyond surface-level commitments to fostering meaningful change.

This work extends previous research on gender pay gap and gender discrimination in the light of fresh insights about how multiple social identities cumulatively aggravate such disparities in work settings and on how organizational structures and practices give rise to such dynamics (Reza, 2022). Although the literature has established the pervasiveness of gender discrimination, comparatively little research using intersectional lens has been conducted to examine how race, class, disability, and sexual orientation affect experiences at the workplace (King et al., 2022; Preddie & Biernat, 2021). In approaching the identities this way, this study contributes to the extant literature by providing a richer understanding of how related structures of power and oppression function in organisations.

Past studies have focused on the separate categories of discrimination or defined inequality in a reductionist manner, for example in terms of the wage gap, or ethnic minorities' representation in top managerial positions (Blell et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2020). Some studies related to the theme of this article have shown that women still face disadvantages in the workplace. However, this study goes beyond those previous findings by showing that gender can only be understood in relation to other forms of inequality (Lindqvist et al., 2021). women in all sectors surveyed said that they encountered barriers to entering leadership roles; women of color and people with disabilities said that gender interacted with these forms of discrimination. This extends the work of Baird and colleagues (2021) whose claim is that intersectionality has to be at the heart of discourses on workplace injustice due to orgnized Multiple Discrimination.

Moreover, this research demonstrates that organisationalised policies are unsuccessful in dealing with the accumulative experiences of professionals. Research in this area has previously focused on the increase of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) policies in today's organization (Alshammari, 2020; Thatcher et al., 2023) showing a widespread implementation deficit. The participants often referred to these policies as being rhetorical or not effectively implemented, similar to what Bowditch et al. (2020) speculated. However, this study builds upon that understanding by providing examples of how policies that do not acknowledge intersecting identities end up maintaining and affirming inequity. while setting up a parental leave policy where maternity leave takes precedence over paternity leave contradicts the messages of gender equality, Delucio & Villicana (2021) support this.

This research also helps fill the gap of research on cultural factors in workplace inequality (Esfahani, 2023). Some implicit cultural rules that exclude groups continue to prevail in spite of a policy change on the inclusion of diversity. Prior research on the impact of organizational culture on employee experiences has been done by Labelle (2020) & Van et al. (2020). This paper extends their work by incorporating descriptive accounts of workers' first-hand experience to show how organizational cultures are invariably exclusionary despite their professed diversity. participants indicated that they found themselves to be left out of decision-making processes, or experiencing microaggressions that disparaged their work, especially those in their organizations' male-dominated industries (Toros, 2021).

In this way, the present study enhances the theoretical understanding of gender inequality at the workplace by filling the above-said gaps in the literature (Feng & Savani, 2020). These

recommend that organisations must go considerably deeper than barely visible tokens and begin embracing intersectionality when designing policy and enacting cultural change. It also requires prescriptive actions including policy review, leadership inclusiveness training across the organization and targeted interventions for employees with multiple devalued minorities. These recommendations mirror many recent suggestions found in the literature (Cavioni et al., 2020; Zeb et al., 2021), and underscore the need for ongoing organisational commitment to establishing environments that are equitable and inclusive both for employees and job seekers.

Conclusion

The study has also presented gender inequality as a nuanced and diverse phenomenon which requires the abolition of the intersectional approach considering how race, class, disability and sexual orientation affect the experiences of discrimination and exclusion of employees. This paper has shown how, despite good intentions, organizational policies perpetuate barriers and marginalization for the people they seek to represent in the first place because they do not account for the experiences of individuals with multiple forms of oppression. These are important pointers to suggest that future policy change in organizations must go beyond compliance to the basic principles of anti-discrimination and equal opportunities for inclusion, but that it must go further to ensure an actionable culture of equal opportunities that addresses deep-seated inequalities. In so doing, this research makes a theoretical and practical contribution to the literature on Gender Inequality in the Workplace, for understanding the manifestations and sources of gender inequality, and for providing practical solutions towards the elimination of gender disparities at the workplace.

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