

## **Sexism and Wage Gap in Workplace**

Shihan Xu

Department of Clinical Psychology, Antioch University Seattle

PSYC7020: Social Justice in Clinical Psychology

Dr. Jude Bergkamp

February 12, 2021

## **Definition of the Ism & system**

This essay focuses on sexism in the workplace and specifically looks at the gender wage gap. Despite increasing emphasis on gender equality in modern society, women still face lower wages in the same workplace than their male counterparts. The gender wage gap has many factors. Other than industry differences and working time, an essential aspect is the discrimination against women in the workplace. Sexism is defined as “attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that support the unequal status of women and men” (Swim & Campbell, 2008, p. 219). To better understand this sexism, we need to look at the privilege protected by sexism and the impact on women who are the affected group. Additionally, I will discuss three perspectives on the wage gap.

Historically, men had been the dominant group in society. Men’s political and economic privilege is protected by sexism. However, with the social change, women’s position rose to correspond to the rise of industrial capitalism. Sexism in the workplace is a dominant gender group that wants to retain its power by oppressing the other gender group. In particular, men’s economic power is protected by sexism in the workplace. They could use their control to preserve their position while taking advantage of opportunities among the limited resources. On the other hand, sexism in the workplace limits women’s occupational options and leads to the earning difference and the devaluation of women’s work and work segregation.

A general poll (Jones, 2005) revealed that 53% of the American population believes that men and women have an equal occupational opportunity at work. However, according to the latest data, in 2017, the median weekly earnings of

full-time female workers were 81.8% of men's (Monti et al., 2020). Then, the question is, besides the observable difference, what else attributes to the gap. In the following, I will discuss the reasons for the gender wage gap through three perspectives.

Firstly, looking from a cognitive perspective at the individual level, homophily preference and status characteristic theories laid the theoretical foundation of gender bias in the workplace. Due to homophily preferences, men prefer to work with other men (2004, Roth). Thus, men's dominance and authority position would lead to more work opportunities for men and assign significant tasks to men. As a result, they are promoting subordinates that benefit male employees and disadvantage female employees. Women's lower promotion rate can directly correlate to their slow growth of wages. It can be seen as occupational stereotyping, but the cognitive mechanism functions at an unconscious level in some cases. Therefore, it is hard to avoid such cognitive mechanisms in the workplace.

The other form of sexism in the workplace is the devaluation of work typically done by women. It is also a type of occupational stereotyping, and the cognitive mechanism behind the depreciation makes researchers look further into it. In 2020, Kronberg examined gender pay differences by looking at the employees' firm tenure. Kronberg investigates whether gender bias would have less effect when employees stay longer in the company. This research introduces two contradictory theories as information-based theories and status characteristic theories. According to information-based theory, the manager would have more information on an individual's productivity when they work longer in the firm. Thus, the gender effect

on pay would mostly affect the new hires and lessened when they accumulate tenures. Alternatively, status characteristic theories describe that a person's gender would be processed as a primary cognitive category. Once we apply the gender status beliefs, we could unconsciously practice the double standards of performance or other gender bias. This study finds no evidence for declining gender effects on pay when employees stay longer, which supports the idea of gender bias and inequality in the valuation of women's work.

Secondly, occupational segregation, which means pairing specific jobs with gender, is another factor for the gender wage gap. Gender segregation can take several forms. Within the job market, labor work such as construction worker may favor hiring males. To some degree, it can be explained by biological or characteristic differences. Biologically, women are physically different from men in strength and reproduction, which impacts particular job performance. Thus, positions that need specific strength and skill may attract more men into the industry. However, the biological difference should not be the direct cause of gender inequality.

Thirdly, the gender difference in personality and ways of thinking can affect behaviors in decision-making. Mainly, when facing high-paying and high-challenging jobs, women are less likely to take a high-paying but challenge task than men (Bieberstein et al., 2020). One research focused on the gender difference in decision-making in entry-level jobs, where taking risks and learning new skills could advance their career in the future. In the research, all men and women participants did one easy task in trial 1 (T-1). They were then given options to choose a hard task with higher pay or another easy task with the same payment as in trial 1. The study showed

that after perceiving the easy task in trial 1, women are 43 % less likely than men to choose a high-paying challenge for the hard task within two levels of the option (T-2Levels). However, in another trial (T-3Levels) that offers a third option, a more challenging task, women's challenge seeking behavior increased by nearly 80% than in T-2Levels, while men's choices remain high.

In T-3Levels, the gender wage gap decreases significantly because more females choose the challenging task in the middle. The anchoring effect and compromise effect are two possible reasons for this observation. Men and women may perceive the first task differently as easy or hard, then their decision on the T-2Levels task would be biased by their initial impression of the first task. Also, the compromise effect describes that when there are multiple choices offered, the most extremes are less favorable than those in the middle. To conclude, various psychological factors such as the anchoring effect and compromise effect impact human behavior that is differed by gender.

### **Historical Genesis of the System**

Historically, men and women shared different roles in family and society. In the primitive society, between 170,000 years earlier and 2070 BC, men took responsibility for hunting while women took the responsibility of reproduction and nurturing the children. After a period of time, men accumulated the experience and knowledge to hunt and earn necessities, and women needed to depend on men's capitals to survive. Entering slave and feudal society between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, while women's positions were improved due to the increased significance of family notion, women were still considered men's accessories. Therefore, when considering

the place of women in the social structure of primitive and slave society, men and women can't be valued equally. For example, the wage gap between men and women servants in England had widened from 1700 to 1860 (Field, 2013). One of the most critical variables that affect the wage were servants' gender.

As American society developed, more women were educated and had more opportunities to work. However, gender inequality persisted, such as men had rights to inheritance and almost all other legal rights, but women lacked political rights and legal independence (Shenk et al., 2010). With these disadvantages, females got denials of higher education and occupation opportunities. Thus, all the availability of the resources caused men to attain their dominance in the capitalist society.

For instance, in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, "citizens" and "voters" were restricted to males only. It was a clear mechanism of oppression for women. The disadvantage of women led to fortify men's advantages and status but limit women's access to legal rights. In addition, it further widens gender segregation and inequality in various aspects. The idea of sexism perpetuates over generations. Although in States like Illinois, women were able to vote, only in certain elections. Women's reactions were divided into two sides. Some allied with several suffragists and joined the Women Suffrage movement (Waxman, 2020). Some believed that voting would "ruin happiness in the home" (McMillen, 2008). The ignorance of women's political voice not only limited women's opportunity in the continuing social development but also restrained the potential of the whole society. Until 1920, the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed all American women the right to vote.

Last but not least, the traditional cultural view plays a significant role in sexism in American history. There are stereotypes about occupation, which

incorporate the idea of pairing work positions with a particular sex. From the traditional view, males' family responsibility is the bread-winner, whereas females' family responsibility is to take care of the husband and family. Thus, the evaluation of work value for men and women is different because of the cultural value, such as distinct family responsibility for men and women.

### **Cultural norms and values that sustain the maintenance of the system**

Several debates are continuing in society. One is whether the occupational segregation based on the historical evidence and biological difference is the most beneficial way for the whole community at the collective level and the happiness of the family at the individual level. The other debate is whether we should continue to practice this idea even with the wide gender wage gap. Some people, especially feminists, argue that this is absolutely gender discrimination and protects men's privilege in a discriminatory way.

The other debates center on who is responsible for the gender wage gap. Employers claim that it was not the gender but the work histories of employees are the key factors that related to the current wage they get paid. On the other hand, female employees argue that they have limited opportunities and get more exposure to lower-paying firms throughout the career. A study found that among the same industry, compared to men, women in their forties that work for firms have lower pay (Monti et al., 2020). The finding supports that the difference in high and low paying firm accounts for over 25% of the wage gap observed in the study. To conclude, firms only responsible for part of the wage disparity, and other factors still need to be identified.

The main impediments are the work segregation and devaluation of women's work due to gender bias. In the health care field, Song et al. (2019) examined gender differences in CEO compensation among not-for-profit hospitals across the United States. Although there is evidence showing that the difference in compensation by gender would largely disappear once at the CEO level of companies, Song et al. hypothesize that due to the long-existing gender stereotypes and biases, the compensation gap between male and female CEOs would still exist. The results suggest that after controlling for hospital and area-level characteristics, average unadjusted annual compensation for female CEOs of not-for-profit hospitals earned 22.6% less than male CEOs of not-for-profit hospitals. Compared to the average yearly wage for male CEOs, female CEOs earned \$132,652 less than male CEOs. This article contributes to the evidence suggesting that sexism substantially affects the wage gap across the health care workplace.

When looking at the cultural perspective, one social-historical myth that keeps the sexism justified is the existence of the Mosuo, which is a small ethnic group living in Southern China. The main feature of their culture is matrilineality. Mosuo family tends to depend on the female side of the family, and children would take the mother's last name. Women's role is the dominance of the household and family. They are responsible for earning money and taking care of children. Therefore, women are viewed with more respect and importance in the community. Although no clear evidence justifies the absence of gender wage gap, females of the family are the head of the house and in charge of most of the capitals and resources.

### **Characteristics of affected groups/individuals**



In North America, for instance, in the United States, women's annual salary is 20% less than that of men in 2015 (World Economic Forum, 2019). The gap had shrunken since 1960, primarily due to women's progress in education and workforce participation and to men's wages rising at a slower rate. The difference between the average gross earnings of men and women not only translates to a perceived glass ceiling for female leaders but also a clear salary disparity between the two genders.

Prominently, the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report prosecuted by World Economic Forum (WEF) each year has shed light on the gender biases permeating the professional world. According to the latest 2020 report, a growing balance of gender ratio in the political field has narrowed the overall global gender gap. Men and women have come close to achieving gender parity in education and health, with 96.1% and 95.7%, respectively (World Economic Forum, 2019). In contrast, in the pursuit of gender equality in the economic field, the gender ratio had regressed from 58.1% in 2018 to 57.8% in 2019. With more numbers being disclosed, scholars identify a rather seemingly cliché distinction between job types held by the two genders, which ties closely to gender bias. It limits women's rights and potential in other men's dominant fields and restrains the development of industries. Since sexism is a historical issue that has existed for a long time, women have started to internalize the message of oppression as compliance with the social structure. However, with the accumulation of education and resources, the young generation holds gender equality more firmly.

Moreover, the rigid differentiation in job types and prejudices against the female fortify stereotypes on men as well. Men would feel more pressured to complete high-paying professional degrees and pursue higher earnings occupations

but not what they enjoy the most. In addition to suppressing men's potential in other fields, stereotypes on men may also create dissatisfaction towards working and life in general, which can be detrimental to their quality of life and mental health. Although aware of the existence of the issue, there are very few things they think they could do at the individual level. The most common view is the self-justified belief that there are biological and social reasons behind the wage disparity and can only be fixed at the intuitional level. At the same time, some believe that their actions won't be able to make the desired change.

### **Analysis of clinical psychologist as agent of oppression**

There is a long history of pay inequity in the U.S. Fortunately, in 2009, President Obama signed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act (2009), which allows victims of unequal payments to file a complaint against the employer. With this Act, American society, including firms and individuals, have to face the wage disparity issue seriously. In the past decades, we have seen tremendous progress in the workforce gender equality since the Equal Pay Act.

For psychologists, further investigation on the variables that affect the gender wage gap is needed. Researchers have found factors that account for part of the wage disparities, but not all the aspects conclusively. The general public would need more knowledge and awareness before taking action to build a more just system. I suggest that studies on the cognitive mechanisms that could prevent or reduce gender bias should be conducted as soon as possible. Then, we would not only be achieving a comprehensive understanding of the issue but having the strategies to promote a more just society. For example, as I discussed earlier, the study found that the compromise

effect impacts females' willingness to take challenges in the workplace (Bieberstein et al., 2020). In other words, when facing different levels of challenges, females would be more likely to take the level in the middle. Thus, presenting multiple levels of challenges is a practical way to encourage women to break through their comfort zone and succeed in the workplace to narrow the wage gap. Other applications, such as evaluating employees' performance using a standardized, informative-based approach, would also reduce gender bias in the workplace.

On the other hand, the psychologist should promote gender equality and increase sensitivity to recognizing sexism in work and life. By providing clients with more information on identifying sexism in the workplace, psychologists can encourage affected groups to speak for themselves. Rather than hoping the system would change, the affected group should also fight for their rights legally.

In conclusion, although global mindsets are shifting to be more progressive and inclusive, absolute gender equality in the workplace and hiring process is still challenging to be achieved. However, the gradually shrunken gap between male and female annual salaries reveals a positive and intergenerational trend among different countries. In other words, the global world has already warmed up to gender equality, and women are negotiating to reach the best positive wage in return.

## References

- Bieberstein, F. v., Jaussi, S., & Vogel, C. (2020). Challenge-seeking and the gender wage gap: A lab-in-the-field experiment with cleaning personnel. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 175, 251-277.  
10.1016/j.jebo.2020.03.037
- Field, J. F. (2013). Domestic service, gender, and wages in rural England, c. 1700-1860. *The Economic History Review*, 66(1), 249-272. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42921522>
- Jones, J. (2005). *Gender differences in views of job opportunity: The Gallup Poll*. Princeton: The Gallup Organization.
- Kronberg, A. (2020). Workplace Gender Pay Gaps: Does Gender Matter Less the Longer Employees Stay? *Work and Occupations*, 47(1), 3-43.
- McMillen, S. (2008). *Seneca Falls and the origins of the women's rights movement*. Oxford University Press.
- Monti, H., Stinson, M., & Zehr, L. (2020). How Long Do Early Career Decisions Follow Women? The Impact of Employer History on the Gender Wage Gap. *Journal of Labor Research*, 41(3), 189-232.  
10.1007/s12122-020-09300-9

- Roth, L. M. (2004). The Social Psychology of Tokenism: Status and Homophily Processes on Wall Street. *Sociological Perspectives*, 47(2), 189–214.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2004.47.2.189>
- Shenk, M. K., Mulder, M. B., Beise, J., Clark, G., Irons, W., Leonetti, D., Low, B. S., Bowles, S., Hertz, T., Bell, A., & Piraino, P. (2010). Intergenerational Wealth Transmission among Agriculturalists. *Current Anthropology*, 51(1), 65-83.
- Song, P. H., Lee, S. D., Toth, M., Singh, S. R., & Young, G. J. (2019). Gender differences in hospital CEO compensation: A national investigation of not-for-profit hospitals. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 76(6), 830-846.  
10.1177/1077558718754573
- Swim, J. K., & Campbell, B. (2008). Sexism: Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors. *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Intergroup Processes* (pp. 218-237). Blackwell Publishers Ltd : Oxford, UK.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470693421.ch11>
- Waxman, O. B. (2020). 5 Myths About the 19th Amendment and Women's Suffrage, Debunked. *Time.Com*.  
<https://time.com/5879346/19th-amendment-facts-myths/>
- World Economic Forum. (2019). *The global gender gap report 2020*.  
[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf)