

# ***GENDER DISCRIMINATION AT WORK:***

## ***Connecting Gender Stereotypes, Institutional Policies, and Gender Composition of Workplace***

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*Research on gender inequality has posited the importance of gender discrimination for women's experiences at work. Previous studies have suggested that gender stereotyping and organizational factors may contribute to discrimination. Yet it is not well understood how these elements connect to foster gender discrimination in everyday workplaces. This work contributes to our understanding of these relationships by analyzing 219 discrimination narratives constructed from sex discrimination cases brought before the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. By looking across a variety of actual work settings, the analysis sheds light on the cultural underpinnings and structural contexts in which discriminatory actions occur. The analyses reveal how gender stereotyping combines in predictable ways with sex composition of workplaces and organizational policies, often through interactional dynamics of discretionary policy usage, to result in discrimination. The findings suggest the importance of cultural, structural, and interactional influences on gender discrimination.*

**Keywords:** *class/stratification; law; work/occupations*

Feminists have long theorized the importance of gender discrimination in women's occupational outcomes (e.g., Reskin 1988). Recent research shows that workplace discrimination continues to be an impediment to gender equality (e.g., Gorman 2005). Yet, *how* gender discrimination unfolds in everyday workplaces is not well understood. Past work

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associates gender discrimination with cultural beliefs about men and women as well as institutionalized policies and practices in workplace organizations (see Ridgeway and England 2007; Glick and Fiske 2007). Other scholarship (e.g., Roth 2004; Hirsh and Kornrich 2008) argues sex composition of the workplace may matter. However, little work has explored how gender stereotyping and elements of workplace structure combine to contribute to workplace discrimination. In the few studies that do consider some of these complexities (e.g., Burgess and Borgida 1999; Gorman 2005), a lack of testing in diverse workplace contexts and across a variety of types of discrimination limits our understanding of how these elements combine to facilitate or impede discrimination.

To build a more comprehensive understanding of gender discrimination, we need to consider discrimination as a process connected to the larger gender system. This means exploring the cultural component of gender ideology, the structural features of sex segregation and formal policies, and the behaviors of institutional actors who apply and enforce such policies in everyday work settings. This work seeks to bring us closer to this kind of understanding by exploring women's experiences with employment discrimination using 219 narratives constructed from cases for which the Ohio Civil Rights Commission ruled that there was probable cause to believe sex discrimination happened. These narratives shed light on how discrimination unfolds for women in everyday work settings and across a variety of types of discriminatory actions. My analyses reveal how stereotyping and gatekeeper views of gender appropriateness combine with institutional policies across organizational contexts to translate into discriminatory actions. By considering these elements and their connections, the findings shed light on how discrimination builds on structural, cultural, and interactional dimensions of the gender system.

## GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT

Men and women experience the world of work quite differently. Wage disparities, occupational sex segregation, and gender differences in authority, for example, are well documented (e.g., Padavic and Reskin 2002). Despite notable changes in work, meaningful differences in these areas remain persistent features of contemporary society (England 2006, 2010). The reasons are complex, including explanations on the supply side (related to individual level differences) and the demand side (related to aggregate or organizational factors) (e.g., Reskin 1993). While there are certainly other factors at play, this paper focuses on discrimination, one

demand side factor associated with gender disparities in employment. Although it is hard to capture the prevalence of gender-based discrimination, some research estimates about four to five percent of workers perceive that they have experienced discrimination in the past year (Avery, McKay, and Wilson 2008). Studies have documented discrimination in a variety of forms, including in hiring (Gorman 2005; Goldin and Rouse 2000), promotions (Olson and Becker 1983), wages (Meitzen 1986), and performance evaluations (American Bar Association 2006) as well as sexual harassment (see Welsh 1999).

Of course, documenting the contemporary occurrence of gender discrimination in employment is only a first step. As Reskin (2000, 320) argues, "we need to move beyond demonstrating that employment discrimination exists, and investigate why it persists in work organizations." We must look at *processes* that lead to unequal outcomes for women and men. The real challenge is to uncover *how* discrimination unfolds in actual work settings.

### **Cultural, Structural, and Interactional Foundations**

Scholars generally regard cultural beliefs about gender as foundational to discrimination against women in the workplace (Ridgeway and England 2007, 193). Consciously or not, individuals translate ideas about gender into discriminatory behaviors through sex categorization and gender stereotyping. Regardless of other statuses they may occupy, people tend to categorize each other by sex, which activates gender stereotypes and may elicit gender-based in-group/out-group processes (Reskin 2000; Ridgeway and England 2007).

Cognitive psychologists have further differentiated between descriptive and prescriptive gender stereotypes. Descriptive stereotypes concern beliefs about traits that one gender has; prescriptive stereotypes involve beliefs about traits one gender should have (Burgess and Borgida 1999). For example, the expectation that women *will* be nurturing would be descriptive, whereas the belief that women *should* be nurturing would be prescriptive. These stereotyped notions of gender difference affect how women and men think and behave (Ridgeway and England 2007; Reskin 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Cognitive psychologists argue the nature of these stereotypes may lead to discrimination in distinct ways. For instance, descriptive stereotyping should translate into discrimination when traits associated with that stereotype are incompatible with the traits needed for the job or task at hand (Burgess and Borgida 1999; Fiske et al. 1991). Thus, women in occupations dominated by men may be especially

prone to this kind of discrimination (Burgess and Borgida 1999). In contrast, violations of prescriptive stereotypes often generate more hostile reactions, as others punish women through discrimination for deviance from gendered expectations (Burgess and Borgida 1999).

While the primary causes of sex discrimination are rooted in cultural beliefs, secondary causes relate to organizational structures, policies, and practices (Ridgeway and England 2007, 199). These institutional features may build on gender stereotypes, disparately affecting women and men workers (Ridgeway and England 2007, 200). As institutionalized elements of organizational structure, such policies and procedures become legitimized, often appearing gender-neutral, while also formalizing men's privilege in the workplace (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Ridgeway and England 2007; Roos and Reskin 1984).

Sex composition of the workplace may affect discrimination as well. Ridgeway and Correll (2004, 517; Ridgeway 2006, 275) argue that gender becomes "effectively salient," or important enough to affect behavior in a meaningful way, in settings where men and women come into contact and also in sex-typed settings where descriptive gender stereotypes are linked to specific job activities or elements. Studies looking specifically at discrimination (e.g., Burstein 1989) often conclude women working in work settings or occupations traditionally dominated by men may be the most vulnerable to gender discrimination and sexual harassment. This may result from men's attempts to preserve privilege in these settings (De Coster, Estes, and Mueller 1999). However, other work finds that an increased presence of women may increase harassment, and specific forms of it, as men interpret women's increased presence as a threat to their power (Chamberlain et al. 2008).

While the literature provides good reason to look to cultural underpinnings and structural contexts, discrimination ultimately concerns actions and interaction (Ridgeway and England 2007). Institutional actors make decisions to hire, fire, promote, and transfer workers. They also set wages, evaluate performance, and create, modify, and enforce organizational policies and procedures. Not only are gendered beliefs and organizational context influenced and reinforced (or challenged) by interactions (Ridgeway 1997; Martin 2003), but gender itself is created and re-created through interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Existing scholarship orients us to cultural, structural, and interactional elements when considering gender discrimination; how these elements relate remains to be systematically explored in real-world work environments. Gorman's (2005) work on gender discrimination in hiring moves

us in the right direction, challenging us to look for connections between gender ideology, organizational structure, and institutional actors engaging in discriminatory actions across a variety of workplace settings. Thus far, however, a lack of available data capturing these elements across diverse settings has been an impediment to such research. In the present study, I utilize a unique collection of narratives constructed from concrete incidents of sex discrimination investigated by the Ohio Civil Rights Commission (OCRC). By systematically and rigorously examining these cases, this study contributes to the literature on gender discrimination by exploring connections between gender stereotyping and workplace policies and their application across a range of workplaces.

## DATA AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

### Data

Data come from cases of sex discrimination in employment filed with the OCRC between 1988 and 2003. The OCRC's master database includes data on the charging party's race and sex, the basis of the charge (e.g., sex, race, religion), the harm or injury that occurred (e.g., unequal wages, firing, sexual harassment), and the outcome of the investigation. In addition to the database, I was allowed access to actual case files. These files generally contain the charging party's account of the alleged discrimination and why they believe it is discrimination, a response to the allegations from the employer, witness statements about what occurred, the OCRC investigative staff's analysis of the evidence, and any reconsiderations of the original OCRC decision, which includes the rationale for the final decision. Most files contain information on the organizational composition of the charging party's workplace as well.

Admittedly, the data capture a select group of discrimination cases. As a legal construct, discrimination focuses on disparate treatment and disparate impact. Thus, the cases show either intentional, unequal treatment based on sex or unequal impact of neutral policies on one sex (see Rhode and Williams 2007). Furthermore, for a case to be included in the data, a worker must experience an adverse employment action, perceive it as discrimination, and file a claim with the appropriate agency (i.e., the "name," "blame," and "claim" phenomenon discussed by Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1981, 635-36). Certain groups of workers, particularly educated women and women in workplaces traditionally dominated by men, may be more likely to do so (Burstein 1989). Of course, there are significant

levels of gender discrimination that women never report (see Beiner and O’Conner 2007; Bisom-Rapp, Stockdale, and Crosby 2007), and there are cases filed that do not fit with socially shared definitions of discrimination. Thus, I recognize the data represent a selective group of women and significantly underestimate discrimination.

Given the nature of the data, I limit my sampling frame to cases of employment discrimination that women filed and in which the OCRC deemed probable cause for a charge of discrimination on the basis of sex (including pregnancy) ( $n = 1,418$ ). A probable cause finding—that it is probable that discrimination occurred—helps distinguish cases with little supporting evidence from those with significant supporting evidence in favor of the charging party’s claim. While most of these cases do not involve a secondary basis (i.e., race, disability, age, and/or retaliation), I include cases with secondary bases in order to consider issues of intersectionality in the analysis. From this sampling frame, I drew a random sample of cases ( $n = 219$ ) from which I created the discrimination narratives (described below) that are the focus of this analysis.

Relying on cases with a probable cause determination makes the sample even more selective, as civil rights investigators must find enough supporting evidence to merit a determination that discrimination probably happened. Many cases never filed, as well as some of the nonprobable cause cases, undoubtedly reflect instances of actual discrimination but may lack supporting evidence that would be convincing to a judicial body. This likely yields a sample of more blatant discrimination cases than exists naturally. Therefore, we should be cautious of generalizing the patterns descriptive of this analysis, particularly the patterns in occurrence, to all cases of gender discrimination.

## Methods

To explore the dynamics of gender discrimination, I immersed myself in these 219 cases, studying them for patterns and emergent themes. For each woman in the sample, I created a discrimination narrative, a history of her discriminatory experiences with the employing organization. The narrative is a summary of the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” of the discrimination based on the documents available in each case file. To construct individual narratives, I used a standardized coding device to systematically record information on contexts and dynamics involved in each case. I recorded basic information on each woman, including her race and job title. I coded for actors named by the charging party as discriminators and their discriminatory actions, including the number, nature,

and basis of the present case as well as any past recorded instances with the same employer from the case file. I also coded for the type of discrimination, stereotyping, workplace composition, and role of policy in the discrimination. I categorized women's experiences into seven *types of discrimination*: expulsion, exclusion, sexual harassment, other harassment, mobility, material conditions, and working conditions. I allowed for multiple types of discrimination within any given narrative. While all narratives share a probable cause finding on sex discrimination, I noted any additional bases as well (i.e., age, race, disability, and retaliation).

Drawing on the prescriptive/descriptive stereotyping literature (e.g., Glick and Fiske 2007) as well as emerging themes that I identified, I systematically coded for presence and type of *gender stereotyping*. Specifically, I coded for descriptive stereotyping, conceptualized as expressions of how women in general are assumed to be and expressions indicating that women's traits are incompatible with a particular job, and prescriptive stereotyping, measured as expressions that a particular woman worker violates gender assumptions. Immersion in the cases suggested the need for an "other" category—that is, other expressions consistent with gender assumptions in ways of thinking—measured as views of the woman as a liability in a way related to her gender or pregnancy and a general gender animosity with no clear rationale.

To consider *workplace setting*, I coded sex composition of immediate workplace setting as male-dominated, female-dominated, integrated, or unclear based on descriptions of the everyday workplace. I found such descriptions in charge forms or supporting documents (generally in the form of statements such as "I am the only woman in the company" or in lists of employee names) and, to a lesser extent, in employer's EE-01 forms that enumerate sex composition. Finally, I systematically coded for the role of *workplace policies* in discrimination. Specifically, I coded for evidence of discriminatory policies, lack of policies, and discretion in policy usage, particularly unequal application or enforcement of policies.

Below, I highlight these dynamics; throughout, I use basic descriptive statistical analysis of the sample to support impressions of pervasiveness. While I do not suggest that occurrences in these data are generalizable to the general population of working women, I highlight issues of proportionality in order to consider the salience of stereotyping and workplace policies for discrimination across work settings. I use the qualitative data to draw out more subtle distinctions and explore in greater depth how these elements combine to shape women's experiences with discrimination. I have changed individual names to protect confidentiality.



## PATTERNS AND PROCESSES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN EMPLOYMENT

### **Descriptive Patterns: Actions and the Organizational Context of Gender Discrimination**

I begin with a look at the kinds of discrimination represented in the discrimination narratives, keeping in mind that one case may contain more than one type of discriminatory action. As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of the narratives involve expulsion (being pushed out or fired) with substantial percentages involving sexual harassment, other types of harassment, unequal material conditions, and unequal working conditions. Cases of blocked mobility and exclusion are less prevalent. These patterns are consistent with those found in other studies of legal claims of discrimination (e.g., Hirsh 2008). Most women reported experiencing multiple types of discriminatory actions. In such instances, it is common for women to experience harassment, especially sexual harassment, and/or unequal conditions prior to being fired or otherwise discharged.

Most workplaces described in the narratives are segregated. For those workplaces about which such information exists, slightly more than half are male-dominated, while a third are female-dominated. About 11 percent are integrated. These patterns align with Burstein's (1989) argument that women in male-dominated work settings are more likely to be represented in legal cases of sex discrimination. Consistent with the general population of the state, the narratives predominately capture the experiences of white women, who make up 80 percent of the cases in the sample.

### **Descriptive and Prescriptive Stereotyping**

As summarized in Table 1, I find evidence of gender stereotyping in almost two-thirds of the narratives. The most prevalent expressions are descriptive stereotypes. These expressions include ideas about women's assumed characteristics (38 percent of narratives) and ideas about women's traits as incompatible with the job at hand (six percent). In eight percent of the narratives, there is evidence of prescriptive stereotyping. In eleven percent of the narratives, there are other expressions of gendered assumptions.

*Women first, workers second.* The discrimination narratives paint a picture of women workers as viewed first as women, second as workers. This appears most clearly in explicit expressions that suggest women's personal lives and roles as wives and mothers make them less invested and less reliable workers. For example, as one witness testified,



**TABLE 1: Descriptive Patterns in Discrimination Narratives,  
n = 219**

	<i>Percentage of Narratives</i>
Type of discrimination	
Expulsion	62
Exclusion	8
Sexual harassment	26
Other harassment	14
Mobility	16
Material conditions	27
Working conditions	26
Multiple types of discrimination	
One type	41
Two types	37
More than two types	22
Sex composition of work setting	
Integrated	8
Female-dominated	24
Male-dominated	37
Unknown	31
Race of victim	
White	80
Black	13
Other	7
Type of gender stereotyping	
Descriptive	44
Prescriptive	8
Other	11
None documented	37
Policy issue	
Discriminatory policy	10
Lack of policy is discriminatory	13
Discretion in policy application or enforcement	51
No observed policy issue	26

Gabe Marshall [Company Vice President] had warned me about promoting women. In my opinion, he has a hang-up about women in the workplace. He expressed the concern to me that younger women are going to have their minds on their family and their children, rather than on the business.

Issues of dependability arise particularly in cases involving pregnancy or maternity. A view of women as sex objects is also common. For instance, one witness says this about the Company President: "He perceived

himself to be king of his harem. [He] wanted sexual relationships with all of the females in the office. This [was] made very clear—he was very sexually aggressive.”

*Gender inferiority.* At times, employers explicitly express ideas about women’s assumed traits—traits that would likely be viewed negatively in any job. In these narratives, authority figures draw on traditional stereotypes of women as unintelligent, hormonal, and overly emotional. Along these lines, Rhonda Patterson, a sales agent, described how the company owner viewed women as unintelligent: “[He] had signs posted stating that ‘no girls [are] allowed’ in the 1200 Club (dollar volume in a pay period). After I reached the 1200 Club, [he] told me that ‘no girls will ever reach the 1500 Club because girls are too dumb.’” The view of women as hormonal and emotional also comes through in a substantial number of narratives. For instance, several employers note women need time off for “monthly days.” Along these lines, one woman notes “The President told me that it was company policy that all women were allowed five personal days per year. He described those five personal days as menstrual days.”

*Women workers, men’s jobs.* While the majority of the narratives that involve descriptive stereotyping concern how employers assumed women to be more generally, gender stereotyping also occurs in cases where there is a perceived mismatch between the gender of the actual or potential worker and the expected gender of the job filler. In particular, gendered assumptions about the skills, mindset, and predisposition needed for men’s work conflict with assumptions about women’s traits. For example, a witness describes the reaction of a midlevel manager to his suggestion that Crystal Sheets take on a role supervising seasonal workers in a utilities industry: “when discussing this matter of Crystal filling the jobs, he claimed that she couldn’t do the jobs of coordinating with him and the seasonals, claimed that ‘she’s a woman’ and cannot handle the job, and should be left to clean cause ‘that’s what a woman is good for.’”

In more patronizing expressions, in a handful of cases employees referenced the hardships of a woman trying to be successful in a male-dominated position as the rationale for denying them opportunities. For example, “Alvin Thompson [Manager] told me that ‘a woman cannot succeed at [this company] because they’re not privy to the good ole boys club.’” In other instances, employers evoke a preference for men given the nature of the work environment. This happened to Courtney Earles as she repeatedly tried to obtain a position as a parts clerk in an auto parts store. As the investigator concluded, “witness testimony substantiates that Charging Party

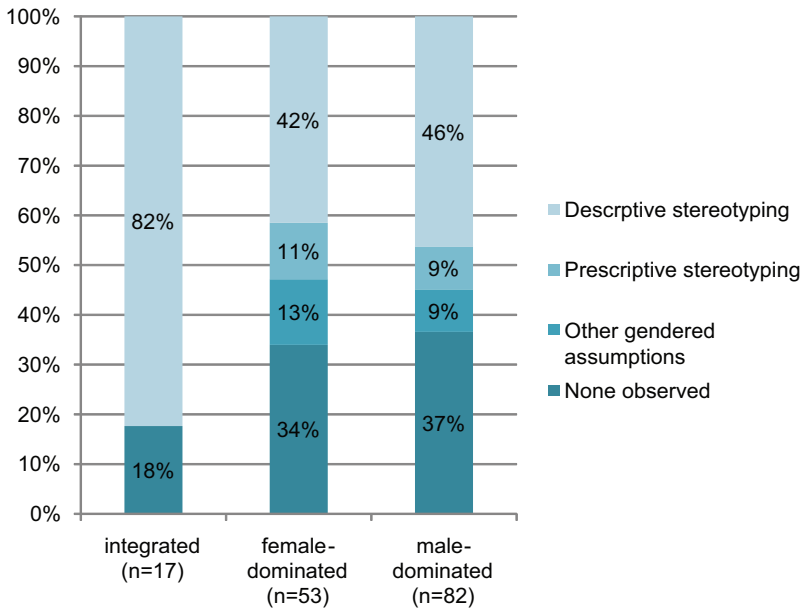
initially interviewed for a counter position, but ‘. . . since she was female,’ was given the bookkeeping position. ‘Mr. Rupp indicated that the people in [the auto parts store] would not like a female at the counter.’”

*Prescriptive stereotypes.* While all of these instances fall into the category of descriptive stereotyping, many indicate prescriptive notions about how women *should be* that lead to discrimination. The narratives of women of color are more likely than those of white women to include this kind of language. There are three primary prescriptive themes. First, employers sanction women for violations of expectations concerning physical attractiveness. In several cases, for example, employers terminated service workers when they became pregnant. As one witness describes, the owner of a bar told her that “it was not attractive” and “the customers did not want a woman in [her] condition working around them.” Second, employers punish women for “unladylike” behavior. Several narratives note employers sanctioning women, but not men, for “inappropriate language” or aggressive behavior. Unique to the narratives of Black and multiracial women, employers sanction women of color for “combative” communication styles and “overbearing” attitudes. A third theme is that employers discriminate against women when they view them as sexually inappropriate or threatening. For example, in several cases coworkers were accused of having a sexual relationship in the workplace. The woman was terminated, but the man received a one-day suspension or no penalty, suggesting a sexual double standard at play.

*Gender bias.* There are two additional ideological themes in these cases. One is general animosity toward women without an underlying rationale. Found in a handful of narratives, these references suggest a view of women in general as “bitches,” “stupid bitches,” and “fucking cunts.” The second is that certain women are potential liabilities. While perceptions of women’s physicality in general (i.e., women as weak) could lead to gender-based discrimination for all women, in the narratives this view was particularly common in employers’ interpretation of pregnant women as potential risks. Employers raise such concerns twice as often in the narratives of women of color, where they more directly made comments such as “[she was fired] because [she] is pregnant could fall down and press charges.”

### **Stereotyping and Workplace Gender Composition**

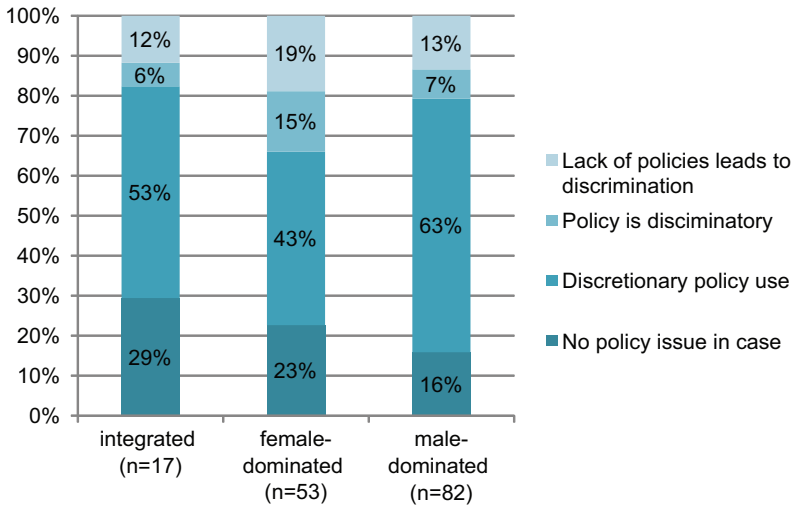
Expressions of gender stereotypes are disproportionately more common in certain organizational contexts. As illustrated in Figure 1, there are



**FIGURE 1: Patterns of Stereotyping by Sex Composition of Work Setting**

proportionately more narratives with manifestations of gender stereotypes among women working in integrated settings; the vast majority of such narratives show stereotyping (14 of 17), compared with 35 of 53 of the narratives from female-dominated settings and 52 of 82 narratives from male-dominated settings.

Composition of the workplace is connected to the type of stereotype (see Figure 1). All of the narratives from integrated settings that show stereotyping involve descriptive stereotyping. Descriptive stereotyping is also the most common type of stereotyping expressed in female-dominated and male-dominated settings. In sex-segregated settings, there is more diversity in the kinds of stereotyping. Prescriptive stereotyping and other types of gender assumptions appear in roughly equal proportions in both female-dominated and male-dominated settings, combining to make up about a quarter of the cases in female-dominated settings and 18 percent of those in male-dominated ones. Proportionately more cases of incongruence between women's traits and the job at hand occur in male-dominated work settings; however, most expressions of descriptive stereotyping are broad assumptions about women's traits.



**FIGURE 2: Patterns in Policy Issues by Sex Composition of Work Setting**

### Institutional Policies as a Mechanism for Discrimination

Issues related to institutional policies play a crucial role in discrimination. Figure 2 illustrates the degree to which policy-related themes appear in the narratives as a mechanism for gender discrimination. Policy-related issues appear in most narratives. Discretionary policy application or enforcement is the predominant issue, accounting for 43 to 63 percent of narratives in each organizational context, while discriminatory policies and a lack of policies appear to a lesser extent. Most of the discriminatory policies concern leave, especially maternity and disability leaves. In instances where policies are lacking, often the missing policies concern sexual harassment, maternity leave, and evaluation criteria. Policies matter the most in male-dominated work settings, where 84 percent of cases involve a policy issue. In female-dominated settings, a lack of policies and the presence of discriminatory policies occur proportionately more often and employers use discretion less often than in other settings. Policies matter the least—although still to a great degree—in integrated settings, with 71 percent of narratives from these contexts showing a policy issue.

Table 2 demonstrates variations in how stereotypes connect with policy issues by sex composition of workplace. These patterns suggest that gender stereotyping is associated with policy-related discrimination in all

**TABLE 2: How Workplace Policies Contribute to Gender Discrimination by Type of Expressed Gender Stereotyping and Workplace Sex Composition**

Work Setting	Type of Gender Stereotyping	Lack of Policies				Total
		Policy Is Discriminatory	Leads to Discrimination	Discretionary Policy Issue	No Policy Issue in Case	
Integrated	Descriptive	1	2	6	5	14
	Prescriptive	0	0	0	0	0
	Other	0	0	0	0	0
	None	0	0	3	0	3
	Total	1	2	9	5	17
Female-dominated	Descriptive	2	7	8	5	22
	Prescriptive	0	2	2	2	6
	Other	1	0	3	3	7
	None	5	1	10	2	18
	Total	8	10	23	12	53
Male-dominated	Descriptive	4	6	21	7	38
	Prescriptive	0	1	5	1	7
	Other	0	2	4	1	7
	None	2	2	22	4	30
	Total	6	11	52	13	82

contexts. However, some variations do exist. Notably, descriptive stereotyping occurs with most instances of discriminatory policies in male-dominated settings but few cases in female-dominated settings. Also the use of policy discretion connected with prescriptive stereotyping is enhanced in male-dominated settings.

### **Stereotyping and Discretionary Policy Use**

Most narratives show that discretion in policy application or enforcement is the primary mechanism through which discrimination happens. Policy discretion occurs in numerous ways. At times, employers use discretion in applying existing policies, such as selectively using specific criteria to select a man for a job. Similarly, employers apply existing rules exclusively to women and hold women to higher standards than men. In some cases, discretion involves decisions to investigate allegations of wrongdoing and how such investigations take place. The narratives reveal discrimination against employees with various lengths of tenure; however, many cases occur when women workers are in a probationary period.

The narrative of Nadine Gibbons, an office clerk in a manufacturing firm, shows a key decision maker in her employment held a generally negative view of women as irrational. As a witness describes, “[The Vice President of the division] said once that he has problems with women because ‘they are the ones who act ridiculous.’” This view resulted in her discriminatory firing via discretionary enforcement of the company’s attendance policy. Noting that Nadine’s instances of minor tardiness stemmed from child care issues that the Vice President and his representatives used to suggest she was an unreliable worker, a former supervisor provided insight into this process.

Former supervisor Stephen Mackie testified about the different treatment given to men and women with respect to absence. In fact, he had advised at least one female subordinate to change the reason for her absence from needing to find a babysitter to car trouble. He did this because there was a general unwritten policy that absenteeism from women due to child care needs was unacceptable. He believes this policy stemmed from the Vice President.

The use of discretion is clear in that Nadine averaged 11.5 *minutes* of missed work, while men terminated for absenteeism averaged five to eight *hours* of missed work in the weeks before discharge.



Descriptive stereotyping also occurred in the case of Liz Parks, a physicist, denied a promotion. Liz describes her supervisor as treating women as though they are “inferior” and notes, “On numerous occasions he has made slandering comments to me about the length of my fingernails, my clothes, [and] the size of my purse.” A witness describes Parks’s supervisor in this way: “[He] doesn’t like females.” In the witness’s description of an interaction with this administrator, she notes,

He said he would prefer a male in that position, because of the people they would be dealing with—other males. . . . By the look on my face he realized what he said, but he didn’t retract it—he just [changed] the subject. He’s usually so careful; it was a slip.

In this case, the administrator’s view of women translated into his discretion in posting job positions, evaluating candidates for positions, and selecting recipients of training opportunities.

While prescriptive stereotyping appears less often than descriptive stereotyping in the narratives, when it is expressed, this view of a particular woman violating gender assumptions also leads to discrimination primarily through selective application or enforcement of existing policies. Generally employers draw on policies about professionalism and/or insubordination to treat women differently. The issue of insubordination arises frequently in cases involving Black and biracial women. For example, Denise Cower, a truck driving instructor, had a romantic relationship with another instructor. After learning the two were living together and expecting a child out of wedlock, the school director admonished her for this relationship and began disciplining her for performance issues and a “lack of professionalism,” particularly offensive language. He ultimately fired her. Indicative of many other cases, the director did not systematically apply this policy. As a witness describes, “[the school] doesn’t follow its policy with write-ups. It gives write-ups at its convenience.” The supporting documentation suggests that while men had been fired for language use, men were retained and women fired for “equally unacceptable behavior.”

In a similar vein, ideas of gender appropriateness translate into discrimination through discretionary policy enforcement in the case of Christy Kinneson, a clerk in a manufacturing plant. The evidence suggests her employers held views of her as violating rules of femininity, with investigators concluding that “the bias against women invaded all levels of the [company’s] managerial staff. Those managers clearly could not tolerate a woman acting like a man.” This negative view was translated into her firing as insubordinate. Although the work environment was

described as “rough and tumble” with vulgar language commonplace and men engaging in similar or worse conduct, her General Manager justified her firing, stating “she showed a blatant disregard and lack of respect for her supervisors, she was insubordinate to her supervisors, [and] she was unable to control her emotions, temper, and language.” Representative of narratives of prescriptive stereotyping, both of these cases illustrate how gender ideas set the standard and policy discretion is the tool used to translate those beliefs into discriminatory actions. The use of policy discretion connected with descriptive stereotyping is enhanced in male-dominated settings.

There are two qualitatively distinctive aspects to cases involving women of color (such as Liz Parks and Denise Cower). The first theme is employers’ emphasis on physical appearance. As shown in Liz Parks’s narrative, employers make negative comments about clothes, accessories, and physical features. Whereas employers and coworkers point out how women are beautiful or attractive in narratives of women in all racial groups, negative assessments of appearance rarely occur in white women’s narratives. A second pattern is employer focus on women of color breaching sexual mores, such as dating married men or dating across racial lines, or being promiscuous. These issues underlie the discretionary policy application or enforcement.

While few narratives show other kinds of gendered assumptions connected with policy discretion, these instances show a common thread of institutional actors labeling pregnant workers as potential liabilities followed by selective application of a policy to end the woman’s employment. For example, a witness for Matilda Lawrence, a pool supervisor at a resort, noted,

I frequently heard Justine Fine [Vice President of Operations] and Marsha Reynolds [Business Office Manager] discussing Matilda’s pregnancy. They both expressed concerns about Matilda’s continued employment. They both stated that they were worried that Matilda might injure herself or her baby by slipping and falling or by exposure to the hazardous chemicals with which she worked. They said they were worried that Matilda would then sue [the resort]. During these conversations, Marsha Reynolds frequently said, “She [Matilda] can’t stay here.”

These concerns over liability led to her discharge for failure to follow company policy. In this case, the policy involved duty to discharge another employee; however, the evidence suggested that decision not to fire the worker was shared by two employees, yet only Matilda was terminated.

Other instances with this theme show the selective enforcement of absenteeism policies consistent with Nadine Gibbons's narrative.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored how gender stereotyping combines with institutional policies across workplace settings to contribute to gender discrimination. Stereotypes of women as less invested workers, views of women as sexual objects, and notions of women's traits as incompatible with specific jobs connect with gender discrimination in a variety of organizational contexts. The use of discrimination when a particular woman violates gender assumptions, however, occurs exclusively in sex-segregated workplaces. Women's experiences with discrimination tend to result to a great extent from workplace policies and their use.

Scholars argue that gender ideology, with its essentialist notions and stereotypical expressions, is the primary cause of gender discrimination (Ridgeway and England 2007). Given that stereotypical thinking remains a feature of gender ideology (see Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, and Lueptow 2001), it is not surprising that stereotypical ideas about how women are and should be are commonplace in the discrimination narratives. This study, drawing on a unique set of data, demonstrates in concrete work settings how stereotyping, particularly assumptions about how women are, feeds into the discrimination women experience.

Past research has also demonstrated that institutional policy may be an important cause of workplace discrimination, as institutional decision-makers incorporate gendered assumptions into the policies they craft (Ridgeway and England 2007). Legal definitions of discrimination focus on policies that while gender neutral in nature, have a differential effect on women or men. Yet little work has considered other ways policies may lead to discrimination. My analysis shows that policies may be at the heart of how gender-based assumptions translate into unequal outcomes for women at work today. However, the issue is not policies per se. Rather, the key mechanism is discretionary policy application and enforcement. In the cases I analyzed, institutional actors more often use facially gender-neutral policies in ways that treat women and men workers differently. In doing so, these decision makers may not perceive themselves to be discriminating, or at the very least, do not want others to perceive them as discriminating.

It is possible that policy use may be a more salient mechanism in contemporary society than previously understood, particularly given the

increasingly bureaucratized nature of work institutions today. While the policies themselves may be more gender neutral, a key question is whether formal policies help to equalize women and men by eliminating discretion and increasing the visibility of employment decisions (see Kalev 2009). Although the present study does not allow me to conclude whether discrimination is more abundant in the absence of policies, it is clear that authority figures use policies selectively in ways that disadvantage women. As leaders of workplace organizations become better aware of discrimination, create more formal policies to govern the workplace, and use more bureaucratic rationales when reaching employment decisions, policy discretion may play a considerable role in generating gender discrimination. If so, this presents substantial challenges to identifying and eliminating discrimination.

While stereotyping and policy mechanisms are important across workplace settings, the narratives show that expressions of gender stereotypes and policy-related issues vary by workplace sex composition. While most discrimination narratives come from segregated work settings, proportionately more of the narratives from integrated work environments contain stereotyping, and this stereotyping is always descriptive. This is consistent with Reskin's (2000) contention that when men and women are in contact with one another, sex categorization leading to gender stereotyping may occur.

In contrast to Burgess and Borgida's (1999) suggestions that descriptive stereotyping would more likely result in discrimination in traditionally male-dominated settings, in this study, segregated work settings showed more varied expressions of gender assumptions—including both descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes, as well as other gendered assumptions. In male-dominated work settings, men may view women as invaders, thus rendering their gender more salient, leading to gender stereotyping and enforcement of gender expectations. Yet in female-dominated settings, expressions of descriptive and prescriptive stereotyping also occur. The general negative connotation of women's descriptive stereotypes may explain this. While employers may value women's assumed traits like nurturance in some contexts, the stereotypes in these data generally suggest women are inferior workers. And given broad beliefs in gender appropriateness, a woman who fails to do gender properly in any setting may be subject to discriminatory sanctions.

Variations in how policies result in discrimination across workplace settings are more subtle. Discriminatory policies and a lack of policies are more significant barriers in female-dominated settings. One potential

reason for this pattern is that the kinds of policies at issue generally relate to maternity, pregnancy, and sexual harassment, and in a setting with mostly women workers, these issues may simply be more salient. However, this contrasts with an expectation that a lack of women workers might lead policy makers to ignore issues like maternity or to develop more hostile policies, especially if few women are involved as policy makers (see Ridgeway and England 2007). This contradiction suggests a need for further study of policy making across organizational contexts. Furthermore, policy-related issues matter the most for discriminatory outcomes in male-dominated settings and the least in integrated ones. Given the importance of discretion, understanding these patterns necessitates greater exploration of the actors in the positions to apply and enforce policy.

As to the issue of process—how gender stereotyping may lead to discriminatory policies or trigger workplace policy use in ways that lead to discrimination generally unexplored in past work—the connections between stereotyping and policy issues appear rather consistent across settings. While there are some nuances in these findings and future work should explore how composition of the workplace may activate these differences, gender composition of the work setting appears to have the greatest effect on discrimination through its relationship with gender stereotyping.

Issues of intersections of race and gender appear in the findings as well. In this study, the general patterns and process tend to be rather similar across racial groups, although the frequency of some kinds of stereotypes is greater in the narratives of women of color. Also, small qualitative differences emerged in employers' comments toward women of color and those toward white women. Data limitations likely hinder the identification of other ways in which intersectionality matters. The nature of the case file material, with its emphasis on showing unequal treatment or impact on the basis of sex, offers limited documentation of how race intersects with gender in a formal sex discrimination case.

The patterns reported reveal substantial roles for gender stereotyping and institutional policies and their use in contributing to gender discrimination in employment. While gender stereotyping lays a cultural foundation for discrimination, discretionary application and enforcement of policies is a primary mechanism through which such assumptions translate into discriminatory outcomes. Gender discrimination is a product of a combination of cultural ideas about gender, structural policies that affect women and men differently, and decisions to apply or enforce those policies

on workers by gender. This presents a striking challenge for those seeking to eradicate discrimination, as its elimination will necessitate shifts in areas of culture, structure, and individual decision-making.

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