

DISCRIMINATION

Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality

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Recent events from Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and beyond have made it clear that gender continues to shape opportunities in the world of work. If the study of gender inequality at work was once a largely academic pursuit, it is anything but that now.

While gender affects employment outcomes in many ways, an important mechanism through which gender inequalities emerge is discrimination. Gender discrimination can occur in schools and educational environments, consumer markets, the health care system, and other institutional domains. Due to the central role of employment in shaping economic security and financial well-being, this article presents evidence on gender discrimination in employment and specifically on discrimination at the point of hire. There are two main reasons for emphasizing hiring: (1) obtaining a job is an early and key component in the employment process, and (2) the research methods for documenting hiring discrimination are well developed and relatively straightforward to deploy. However, it is important to note that gender discrimination emerges throughout the employment process, from wage setting to promotions and beyond.

Definition and Measurement

Gender discrimination is usually conceptualized as the differential *treatment* of a person (or group) due to their gender. In other words, a woman experiences discrimination during the hiring process when she's passed over for a man even though she has equal skills, educational credentials, underlying ability, experience, or other attributes and endowments that imply equivalent expected productivity. By this definition, discrimination is about behaviors rather than attitudes, beliefs, or ideologies.

This conceptualization of gender discrimination has two important implications. First, it can be *difficult to observe*, as researchers aren't usually present at the moment of hire, nor do they have access to the information governing hiring

KEY FINDINGS

- As audit studies spread and take hold, a large body of compelling evidence on gender discrimination in hiring has developed.
- This evidence reveals that not all women experience the same amount of discrimination. It's especially costly for a woman to be a parent: At the point of hiring, parenthood sharply penalizes women but not men. However, women with part-time employment histories are *not* penalized, whether compared with men who have part-time employment histories or women who have full-time employment histories.
- Gender discrimination is more likely to emerge when the applicant's commitment to work can be called into question or when an applicant is behaving in a gender-nonconforming way.

decisions. Because discrimination is a behavior that occurs when someone on the demand side of the labor market (e.g., employer, manager, hiring agent) treats someone on the supply side of the labor market (e.g., job applicant, employee) differently, it can be difficult for researchers to observe this behavior at the moment it occurs.

Second, even if a researcher could effectively become a "fly on the wall" at the moment when callbacks were being decided upon, discrimination would still be *difficult to detect*. After all, job applicants and employees are rarely identical. Indeed, they often differ along many axes. The mere differential treatment of two job applicants who also differ by gender does not necessarily mean that discrimination is at play.

To address this set of methodological issues, scholars often use field-experimental techniques, sometimes referred to as audit studies.¹ These studies typically send fictitious job applications for real job openings, randomize the gender of the job applicant (often using names), and then track employ-

ers’ positive responses to each applicant (often referred to as “callbacks”). Because everything except the gender of the applicant is held constant, any gender difference in employers’ responses to applicants is interpreted as evidence of discrimination.

These experimental designs provide researchers with a direct lens into the treatment of job applicants. Additionally, this approach gives researchers control over the characteristics of the applicants, thus allowing them to more plausibly ensure that any differential treatment that emerges is due to the characteristic of interest—gender, in our case—rather than some other confounding factor, such as skill or experience.

Key Findings on Gender Discrimination in Hiring

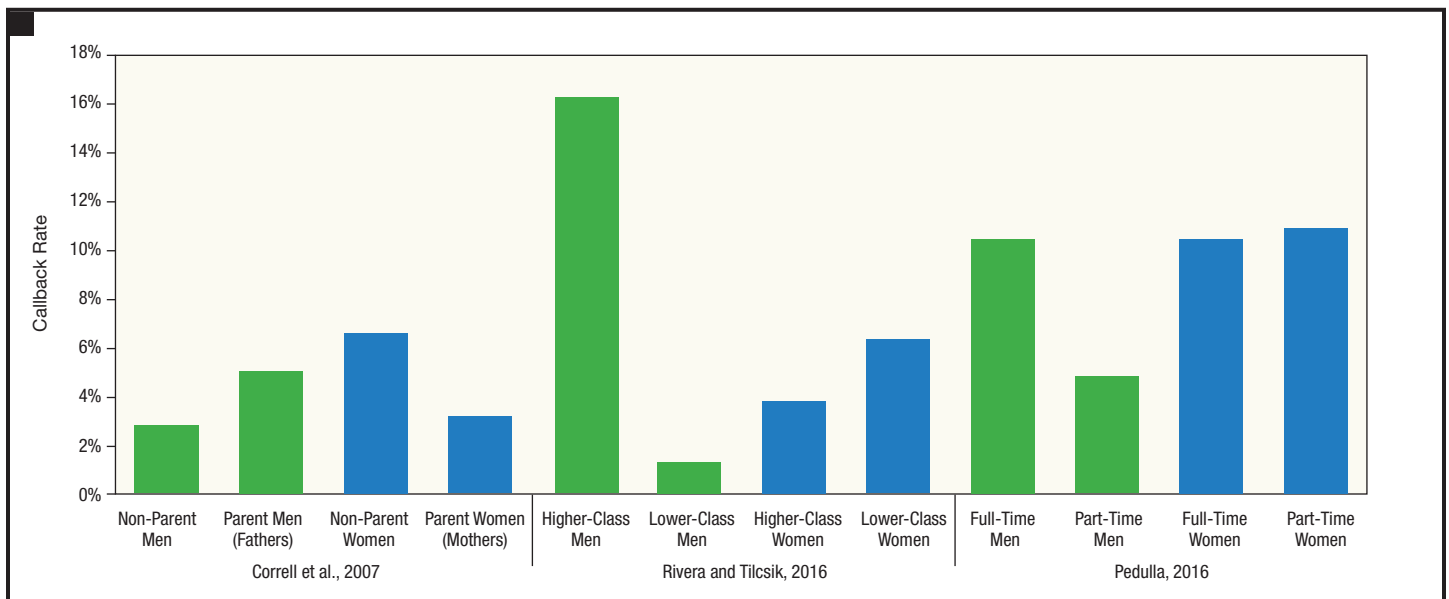
There is a growing body of field-experimental evidence on gender discrimination in hiring in the United States. This evidence points to the deep and persistent consequences that gender discrimination has for employment outcomes.

It is not the case, however, that all types of women are disadvantaged or that they’re disadvantaged to the same extent at the early moments of the hiring process. Rather, the average “gender effect” hides significant complexity, and recent research highlights how gender works with other applicant

characteristics and contextual forces to produce disparate outcomes. At the individual level, gender intersects with an applicant’s parental status, social class background, and prior employment history to affect the likelihood of receiving a callback for a job. These three key results, which are summarized in Figure 1, are central to our current understanding of gender discrimination in hiring. Although there are of course other important forces at work, especially race and ethnicity, the discussion below focuses on three key forces that reveal how differential perceptions of worker commitment can drive some types of discrimination.

Parental Status: Figure 1 reveals, first, that the effects of gender vary by parental status. These estimates—derived from the research of Shelley Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik²—demonstrate that women face a penalty when they have children, with callback rates declining from 6.6 percent for women who are not parents to 3.1 percent for women who are. On the other hand, fathers do not face a callback penalty relative to childless men. If anything, there’s a benefit to parenthood among men (although this difference is not statistically significant). This research also suggests that the motherhood penalty exists largely because mothers are perceived as being less committed and less competent.

FIGURE 1. Callback Rates by Gender and Other Applicant Characteristics



Note: Comparisons within each study provide information about how gender and other characteristics intersect to produce callback rates. Caution is encouraged when comparing callback rates across studies, given the different timing and approach used for each data collection effort. Additional details about the design and implementation of each study can be found in the relevant articles. Source: Callback rates are drawn from the three studies noted in the figure (with full citations in the notes section).

Social Class: Social class may also affect male and female applicants differently. One study of the legal labor market—conducted by Lauren Rivera and András Tilcsik³—found that male applicants benefit heavily from signals that indicate higher social class origins (e.g., participation in certain elite sports, such as sailing and polo), but female applicants do not. It appears that women with higher-class signals on their resume are penalized due to concerns about their commitment to intensive careers. The callback rate for higher-class men (16.3%) was found to be more than four times greater than that for higher-class women (3.8%).

Employment History: Hiring outcomes are also affected by the intersection of gender with nonstandard or mismatched employment histories. In my own research, I have shown that for men, a history of part-time employment—a type of work that is highly feminized in the United States—has severe negative consequences in the job application process.⁴ Indeed, employers treat men with part-time employment histories as negatively as they treat men who have experienced long-term unemployment. However, women with part-time employment histories are not penalized compared with women who have remained in full-time jobs. A complementary survey experiment finds that men may experience a penalty for part-time work because they are perceived as less committed.

The foregoing results pertain to the interaction of gender with individual-level attributes. What does audit study research tell us about the additional and complementary effects of contextual forces (where “contextual forces” pertain to features of the environment in which the individual finds herself)? Research in this area reveals that gender discrimination is sensitive to the circumstances surrounding the job application. The evidence suggests, for example, that gender discrimination varies across such job characteristics as (a) status (i.e., professional-oriented versus working-class jobs), (b) gender composition, and (c) gender-typing.

It will not be possible in this short piece to review this literature comprehensively. It bears noting, however, that some of the relevant research brings in several of these contextual factors at once. One recent study—conducted by Jill Yavorsky⁵—found, for example, that women experience discrimination when applying for male-dominated working-class

jobs. Men, however, experience discrimination when applying for female-dominated jobs, regardless of the status of the position. This study also uncovers variation in the treatment of men and women applicants depending on the gender-typing of the job (as measured by the masculine and feminine language used in the job postings to which the fictitious applications were submitted). Thus, the context of evaluation plays an important role in shaping the emergence of gender discrimination.

Conclusions

Is there anything that unifies these seemingly disparate results? There indeed is. Across studies, perceptions of applicant commitment appear to be highly relevant in understanding why gender discrimination is likely to emerge. Why, for example, might men benefit from being fathers while women are penalized for being mothers? One likely explanation is that employers worry that mothers will be less committed workers (whereas fathers, not being as burdened by domestic duties, can still be highly committed). Why are men, more so than women, penalized for a history of part-time employment? It’s likely because men’s part-time employment, unlike women’s, implies an atypical work profile that calls into question their commitment to work. It follows that interventions aimed at shifting attributions about commitment might prove successful.

Future research should examine how gender discrimination varies by the policies, practices, and demographic composition of workplace organizations. How might increasing women’s representation in leadership positions affect hiring discrimination? How might the use of new technologies during the hiring process exacerbate or mitigate gender discrimination? How can backlash be avoided as companies attempt to correct for long-standing discriminatory practices? By taking on these questions and thus deepening our understanding of the underlying processes that drive discrimination, we will be better able to design interventions to prevent gender discrimination in the future.

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NOTES

1. For additional details and resources regarding audit studies, see www.auditstudies.com.
2. Correll, Shelley J., Stephen Benard, and In Paik. 2007. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112(5), 1297–1339.
3. Rivera, Lauren A., and András Tilcsik. 2016. "Class Advantage, Commitment Penalty: The Gendered Effect of Social Class Signals in an Elite Labor Market." *American Sociological Review* 81(6), 1097–1131.
4. Pedulla, David S. 2016. "Penalized or Protected? Gender and the Consequences of Nonstandard and Mismatched Employment Histories." *American Sociological Review* 81(2), 262–289.
5. Yavorsky, Jill. 2017. *Inequality in Hiring: Gendered and Classed Discrimination in the Labor Market*. Doctoral Dissertation. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio State University.