

Editorial
Gender Bias in Employment: Implication for Social Work and Labor Studies

Marquita R. Walker

Gender bias in employment is not a new phenomenon. The historical devalued status of women and equity-seeking groups preserved in cultural and social gendered roles permeates the workplace and contributes to institutional structures which are fashioned by and reproduced through traditional norms and mores relegating women and equity-seeking groups to secondary status roles. The question then becomes is the continuation of these reinforced structural norms in the best long-term interest of all humanity? What are we giving up when we relegate over half of the world's population to secondary and devalued status? What gains could be made if all workers were given the same opportunities, supports, and encouragements to reach their full potential.

This special section of *Advances in Social Work* reflects how gender bias in employment, as evidenced from women's placement relative to men's placement in the global labor market in which women's earnings are less than men's earnings, contributes to and reinforces the reproduction and maintenance of institutional power structures which contribute to disparities in gender equalities and result in discrimination against women and equity-seeking groups in the workplace. The marginalization of women and equity-seeking groups in employment occurs through overt or covert practices even when anti-discrimination legislation is in place. According to political economy theory, the labor force is a gendered field with historical influence, unequal power relations, and unequal access to resources among and between groups that contributes to gender oppression, especially in the absence of collective action. The confluence of historical oppression expressed by workers across the global lends itself to the intersection of collective and social action to correct injustices and secure for global workers a more equitable power dynamic within the employment relationship. Because the disciplines of labor studies and social work are partners in the search for social justice, their convergence provides a platform from which to launch an exploration of ways to correct this power imbalance.

Researchers and practitioners in the fields of social work and labor studies share a long history of collaboration in alleviating social suffering and promoting social justice dating back to the late nineteenth century when Jane Addams, founder of Hull House, a settlement house in Chicago created to help the indigent, "advocated for policy initiatives to protect working women and orphans and to improve working conditions for wage workers" (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 2006, p. 296). The settlement movement, which sought social reform through the eradication of poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality and led to the development of the National Women's Trade Union League, was supported by Jane Addams and Lillian Wald who provided support in organizing workers into unions, supporting striking workers, and helping create the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (Axinn & Stern, 2001), the Women's Shirt Makers, the Dorcas Federal Labor

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Union, and the Chicago Women's Trade Union League (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 2006).

Addam's initial relationship with the labor movement is reactive as she tries to settle disputes through mediation and voluntary arbitration between workers who visit Hull House and their employers. The intensity of her actions increases as she becomes acquainted and works with Mary Kenney, a union organizer for the Ladies' Federation Labor Union (LFLU). Kenney, an immigrant bindery worker spending 70 plus hours per week in the factory, is fired for demanding a raise and looks to the LFLU for help. Addams offers support for Kenney by allowing organizing meetings to occur at Hull House and offering publicity and city connections. This mutual understanding of women's working conditions and the need to be proactive leads to a "long engagement with the labor movement" (Knight, 2005, p. 15).

The founding principles of social justice, civil rights, and poverty alleviation continue to bring together social work and labor unions in an expanded twenty-first century mission focusing on concerns about social and economic changes in state and national government policies, growing poverty and inequality, exclusion, marginalization, and discrimination. Building on these disciplinary connections strengthens the commitment to develop strategies to address local and global inequities exposing covert and overt policies that affect women's ability to reach their full potential.

Institutions, as social constructs, are fashioned by collective choices. Both direct and indirect historical bias, formed by powerful entities' past choices against women, result in depressed economic and social empowerment of women, a disproportionate share of women in precariat and informal employment, more women in unpaid and caregiving work, fewer women entering science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers, depressed wages, and limited opportunities for women in male-dominated work arenas. The current state of economic and social gender bias leading to discrimination is unacceptable but not inevitable. Reductions in gender inequality have been addressed to some extent through legislation, but collective action is necessary to eliminate gender inequities.

The aim of this special section, "Gender bias in employment: Implication for social work and labor studies" is to address ways of increasing women's power in the workplace through institutional policies aimed at eliminating direct and indirect gender discrimination. Gender discrimination has significant economic costs for individuals and families, broader communities, and the global marketplace. The empirical evidence linking gender discrimination in social institutions to per capita income is robust and reducing gender discrimination is not only good economic policy, but also right and just. Contributions to the section address either theoretical or practical approaches that explore ways in which gender bias in employment is influenced through existing institutional structures and policies and include recommendations for reaching gender equality through regional, national, and global policymaking.

Using thematic content analysis informed by grounded theory, Alex **Redcay**, Ph.D., LCSW, Millersville University and Wade **Luquet**, Ph.D., LCSW, Gwynedd Mercy University explore gender expansive behavior, expression, and identity in the hiring,

promotion, and retention of transgender individuals which result in increasing levels of job insecurity by reviewing workplace discrimination legal cases involving transgender individuals in “Institutional change and transgender employment.” Though some public support for protections does exist and some firms and local and state governments have voluntarily added sexual orientation and gender identity to their non-discriminatory policies which prohibit discrimination against LGBTQ workers, there still does not exist a comprehensive non-discriminatory law which includes gender identity. Consequently, though discrimination may be reported, much is never legally challenged.

Redcay and Luquet survey 139 transgender-identified workers who respond to open-ended questions about their work experience and advice they might give to fellow transgender workers. The authors conclude the workplace for transgender workers is both hospitable and hostile and surmise the revision of non-discrimination policies to include gender identity and expression would lead to change if followed by action and enforcement.

The impact of employment discrimination against LGBTQ workers negatively contributes to their mental and physical wellbeing, ability to secure gainful employment, and subsequently maintain decent living standards as well as highlighting institutional discriminatory barriers in place which impede transgender workers from reaching their full potential as employees. Corrective action must encompass changes in local, state, and federal laws to include workplace protections for transgender workers.

Kidist **Mulugeta**, MA, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Hone Mandefro **Belay**, MSW, MA, University of Gondar, Ethiopia, and Ajanaw **Alemie** Desta, MSW, University of Gondar, Ethiopia, analyze the vulnerabilities, legal protections, and work conditions of female domestic workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia using a human/labor rights-based approach. Employing a cross sectional qualitative research design using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, their findings indicate female domestic workers experienced verbal/psychological/physical/sexual abuse, had no labor rights or protections, rarely had clear contractual relations, worked long hours for low pay and had little to no privacy in the workplace.

Though the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which prohibits indirect discrimination of women in any sector by employers, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention no. 189, which establishes global standards for domestic workers, could serve as platforms for employer civility toward female domestic workers, the state lacks political commitment to enforce these protections, and cultural factors such as illiteracy and poverty among the workers contribute to a cloak of silence shrouding the suffering of female domestic workers. Recommendations to correct these injustices include developing a relevant city and country legislative framework to advocate for and protect female domestic workers.

Based on a “claims-making” framework, which posits data and facts construct a basis for a claim which is open to subjective interpretation and transforms a situation into a social issue which must be recognized and addressed, Elizabeth **Steiner**, research assistant, University of Pittsburg, Sandra **Wexler**, Ph.D., ACSW, and consultant, University of Pittsburg, and Rafael Jacob **Engel**, Ph.D. and associate professor, University of Pittsburg,

use a qualitative descriptive approach to examine 17 experts' claims-making arguments for raising the minimum wage for hospital workers in Pittsburg, PA in their article "Examining experts' arguments for increasing the minimum wage: Insights for social work advocates. Advocates for and against raising the minimum wage provided rationale for their positions during a city-council-appointed commission meeting held to determine recommendations for raising low-wage hospital service workers' wages. The authors reviewed the claims-makers' testimonies and thematically segregated them into three broad arguments: economic considerations, social and economic justice concerns, and moral rationales. Findings conclude social work advocates construct a more effective argument for raising the incomes for low-waged workers by using a combination of emotion and more than one rationale for the justification of their assertions.

References

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