

# Awareness and recognition of gender discrimination



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As shown in chapter two, recent literature proves that gender discrimination continues to exist in today's workforce, evident in the fact ' that there are still significantly more men in management positions than women' (Wentling, 2003). This research topic concentrates on three main insights to female students' perceptions of gender discrimination in the workplace. (i) The level of awareness and recognition of Gender Discrimination, (ii) The extent Gender Discrimination is perceived on one self, and finally, (iii) Gender Discrimination as a recognised obstruction to career advancement. Indeed, the above areas correlate to the dissertations research objectives. In order to determine the objectives, the interview questions concentrated on the following forms of discrimination; Stereotyping, Pay and Career advancement. These discriminative indicators helped measure the three objectives relative to female Management undergraduate perceptions of gender discrimination in the workplace. Below an analysis of the findings are themed and contribute to the relevant literature discussed in chapter two.

#### 4. 2 Student awareness and recognition of Gender Discrimination in the workplace

The results of the interviews were fairly surprising despite its equivalence with similar studies. All eight female students did not completely disregard the fact that, various forms of gender discrimination persist within the workplace, with comments such as:

' I don't think it's as much of an issue as it was in the past, but I think there are some elements of gender discrimination present in the workplace' (P2, 3rd year, Management student).

Although hesitant, all participants had some knowledge of gender discrimination as they recognised various discriminative issues that women as a social group may face at work. As shown on the interview guide in appendix 3, question two openly invites participants to express levels of recognition on the various discriminative issues that potentially take place at work. As a result, a common acknowledgement of gender discrimination by those interviewed, was the notion of unequal pay, with one respondent commenting:

‘ In a recent article I read, it said 90% of women in any kind of workforce get paid less than men in full time jobs. This is astonishing. After reading that article I was shocked. I never knew it was that severe, especially in this day and age’ (P1, 3rd Year, Management Student).

Whilst participant one recognised pay is a current discriminative issue at work, she was still taken back at the thought of its severity today. This suggests that participants show little attention to the issue unless the topic of gender discrimination is discussed. Nonetheless, whereas all participants introduced the concept of unequal pay, the majority also identified aspects of gender based stereotyping. In fact one respondent stated:

‘ Women are typically stereotyped for being incapable in their job roles than men since there considered “ sensitive”. They are pushed aside and not able to become involved in important projects that could potentially promote them, hence there are fewer women in senior positions’ (P1, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

Therefore, the above comments indicate that female Management students are not completely ignorant towards the discriminative reality that takes place in the workplace. In fact, female students accept the existence of gender discrimination as the majority admitted to the various discriminative issues before I had the chance to introduce the subject of, unequal pay and stereotyping. Furthermore, it was interesting to know where this acknowledgement of gender discrimination was discovered. The majority of the participants stated that the media offered much information on the topic, yet claimed that most of it is likely to be exaggerated. Nonetheless, all eight female students mentioned, University teachings were the main source of information to identifying gender discrimination. Many were not aware of its existence, until the Human Resource Management (HRM) module in Management Studies introduced the subject. One respondent commented:

‘ In second year, we did a module on Human Resource Management, and covered quite a large amount of information on gender. I remember watching a video in the lecture on Alan Sugar discriminating a woman in regards to maternity leave’ (P2, 3rd year, Management student).

In contrast to Ruggiero et al (1995), the interviewed participants were not as reluctant as authors suggest in perceiving the discrimination that confronts them (Ruggiero et al, 1995), since they were persuaded about the reality of inequality through University teachings and media. Instead, female students declared gender discrimination is adversely having an effect on ‘ other women’ since they were aware of what it entails. Therefore, participants are in accordance with Stewart et al (2000), who confirms, disadvantaged

groups are extensively aware that various groups’ experience some form of  
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mistreatment in comparison to others (Stewart et al, 2000). In this case, the participants identified that, unequal pay and stereotyping are perceptible forms of discrimination current women face at work.

Additionally, the majority of those interviewed suggest that Management Studies is not a masculine course to study, with one interviewee observing, 'there seems to be more girls on the course than boys' (P1, 3rd year, Management student). This supports Powell et al (2005) in the proposition that 'women's occupational aspirations have become more similar to those of men' (Powell et al, 2005) since both genders share a common interest in pursuing a business career, whatever its gendered challenges. However, the participants recognised that Management as an occupation (rather than a field of study) can be considered masculinised, particularly if specialising in a specific area of business. With one interviewee commenting:

'When studying a business course, it really depends on what area a student specialises in. For example, you will see more boys following a career in finance, whereas girls may prefer a creative and relational side to business such as Marketing or HRM.' (P3, 3rd Year, Management Student).

This response correlates with Tomlinson's (2005) suggestion that financial skills such as accountancy are considered masculine, and as such the relevant professions tend to be male-dominated (Tomlinson, 2005).

Alternatively, the response also supports, Bible et al (2007) in their argument that, in only four sectors of the business world women seem to transcend the glass ceiling with one sector being, 'consumer advertising and marketing' (Bible et al, 2007). Indeed, the notion that occupations are in fact

segregated, are acknowledged by the majority interviewed, whom identified the 'social role theory' proposed by Eagly et al (2002), whereby male and female personal qualities are divided between masculine and feminine (Eagly et al, 2002) career ambitions. Hence, the majority of female undergraduates mentioned they wish to successfully advance in a marketing career since it is considered an accepted female skill in the business field. In fact, one student mentioned that she is less likely to experience any negative stereotypes in the workplace since her chosen profession in marketing enables women to 'conform to less competition with men, as women are considered to perform better' (P5, 3rd Year, Management Student). Therefore, participants identified that workplaces regard female characteristics as best suited in less demanding occupations. Hence, female students wish to pursue a career in the 'softer' side of management (Steele et al, 2002) where their feminine skills and qualities are appreciated. Overall, the research findings relative to objective one conclude that, the interviewed participants are aware of gender discrimination since they accepted, negative stereotyping and unequal pay are discriminative issues women as a social group experience in today's workplace.

#### 4. 3 Student Perception of Gender Discrimination on self

While all female students affirmed the existence of gender discrimination women as a social group may face in the workplace, the majority however did not perceive gender discrimination as a likely barrier that they will encounter personally. The findings were similar to Sipe et al's (2009) study whereby female students' perceptions of gender discrimination did not align with empirical research on workplace gender discrimination. This was <https://assignbuster.com/awareness-and-recognition-of-gender-discrimination/>

particularly evident through interview questions nine and ten (See appendix 3), that directly measured female students perception of gender discrimination on self. Interestingly, the interviewed participants presented comments that contradicted their views on gender discrimination against 'other' women by stating:

' No, I doubt ill experience any form of gender discrimination. We as women live in a new and improved working generation' (P3, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

In fact, the majority of the participants suggested that they will not be personal victims of discrimination in reference to negative stereotyping and unequal pay, by making comments such as: ' No, I won't be stereotypically threatened and ill make sure of it' (P7, 3rd Year, Management Student). It is argued that such behaviour is strongly influenced by what Taylor et al (1990) refers to as ' personal/group discrimination discrepancy' concept (Taylor et al, 1990). Whereby disadvantaged group members, such as young women, perceive a higher level of discrimination aimed at their group members, compared with them as individuals (Taylor et al, 1990). This was apparent amongst those interviewed, who dismissed the idea that negative stereotyping and unequal pay may be personal forms of gender discrimination as one participant stated:

' No I won't be paid unequally. But that is because of the area I will be working in. I think your career area has an influence on whether you're a target of gender discrimination or not. I doubt I'll face any forms of discrimination in a Marketing career' (P5, 3rd Year, Management Student).

Although the notion of experiencing unequal pay was directly rejected by the participant, it can be argued, the above response also suggests female students internalise their career decisions in areas they are likely to be accepted. In turn, female students may feel a sense of security when adjusting to careers that carry feminine entities such as marketing, hence underestimating the likelihood that they may be victims of gender discrimination. In fact, most the typical comments from those interviewed were adamantly sincere that inequality can be prevented based on their determination to tackle such an issue if raised. For instance one interviewee commented:

' No it won't affect me. If it did I wouldn't have taken this degree and let it become a waste just because I'm a ' potential' victim of stereotypical discrimination. Being stereotyped in the public eye at work is an issue that many women can't control, but what they can do is prove themselves and others wrong that they are indeed as good as men' (P2, 3rd year, Management student).

Such responses were typical from participants. Whilst the majority of those interviewed recognised that women are stereotypically perceived incapable to manage in comparison to men, the participants remained assured that such discrimination can be personally counteracted by positive attitudes, ensuring that their skills as managers would be apparent, and therefore enough to overcome the possible forms of gender discrimination. Hence, female students perceiving gender discrimination as an unlikely barrier they will encounter personally. As Tomlinson (2007) suggested, a student's career progression is shaped by their attitude and approach, rather than the <https://assignbuster.com/awareness-and-recognition-of-gender-discrimination/>



structure of opportunity in the market (Tomlinson, 2007). Indeed, such optimism can be explained through Crocker's 'attribution ambiguity' theory whereby disadvantaged group members, in this case women, engage in self-protection if a negative contribution is made towards them (Crocker et al, 1989). Therefore, participants responded defensively when positioned as a target of discrimination, with one respondent commenting:

' Apparently, women are to " sensitive" for demanding jobs like Management and therefore are " assumed" they can't do a better job than men. A woman can do just as well, or even better, if high levels of dedication are present at work' (P4, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

This comment was particularly appealing, as the participant sarcastically mocks the notion that all women are generalised to obtain ' sensitive' attributes and thus expected to perform less vigorously in comparison to men. The majority of the participants imposed defensive responses by attributing negative feedback to discrimination when they felt at a disadvantage, suggesting that a woman can prevent stereotypical threats if proven she is just as capable as men. It can be argued, by amplifying self-esteem, female students ' reactively' conceal rather than reject the personal effects of gender discrimination by expressing positive responses for which present them as immune to the matter. In other words, participants considered a tactic acceptance of gender discrimination to ensure it won't personally affect them. Consistent with the ' psychological reactance theory' put forward by Brehm (1966), when participants felt a threat to their right of freedom, they presented an instance reaction to protect their image as

future business employees, by making comments such as:

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' Yeh, there are talks of unequal pay, but I personally think it could be exaggerated, so I doubt it. Things are getting better, because you see successful women out there. In fact, by being aware of unequal pay will only encourage me to do my research before going into any job and negotiate my salary, to know what the average pay should be like for that firm' (P8, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

Interestingly, although reluctant to accept the possibility of experiencing unequal pay, the above participant slightly anticipates the issue by developing a strategy to convince that she will prevent the possibility of experiencing unequal pay. In general, the majority of the participants were reluctant to allow gender discrimination as a personal barrier towards career success, therefore its presence and effects are underestimated, and thus perceived as being of little consequence since the issue is assumed to be easily prevented. In fact, several referred to legislation laws as a personal protective solution; though presumably the reality that those laws are clearly not always complied with, since forms of inequality prevails in the workplace (Guardian, 2010). However, the reality was not addressed by female students as shown in the comment below:

' Besides, there are strict legislative Laws and Acts that help prevent unequal pay. With them around, experiencing inequality in today's workforce is unlikely' (P5, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

The above response is one of the typical comments participants made suggesting they are immune to gender discrimination. Indeed, the majority perceived gender discrimination as a minor concern in their future careers,

thus likely to enter a 'gender-neutral' workplace whilst legal protection is in place. Conversely, it is also interesting to discuss the minority of those interviewed that in fact, admitted:

' If it's happening to various business women today, then what makes me any different, it's clearly an issue that can't be controlled, not even by law' (P4, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

Although only three out of the eight participants interviewed, support this view, it is interesting to acknowledge the differing judgments female students propose, relative to gender discrimination at a personal level. In fact, the minority accept they may become possible victims of discrimination like ' other women', unlike the majority whom underestimate this view.

Overall, it can be argued, female Management students' perceptions of gender discrimination support the ideology of a meritocratic society.

Statistics show, female undergraduates (as a group) tend to outperform males within higher education (National Statistics, 2007). Moreover, within universities, students are assessed based on the quality of their scholarly work, and not perceived skills based on their gender. Therefore, female undergraduates are likely to view the workplace as equally assessed, and relatively gender neutral, due to the credited and reinforcing atmosphere universities provide. Thus, explaining the underestimated attitude female students' convey towards gender discrimination. Indeed, the majority admitted to the various discriminative issues women as a social group experience, yet optimistically expressed that, gender discrimination will not

personally affect them in their business careers since they ensure it can be prevented.

Then again, although participants accept gender discrimination exists amongst women as a social group, it can also be argued that, female students' somewhat implement and accept gender discrimination as a personal concern. For instance, by participants deliberately choosing careers in Marketing to prevent the risks of becoming personal victims of discrimination, suggests that interviewees are subconsciously limiting their aspirations to careers where they feel they will be accepted. Indeed, by specialising in areas in favour of women (such as marketing), female students have internalised that the business workplace is male favoured and therefore they would rather work within it, rather than against it, to avoid the threats and challenges of gender discrimination in their careers. Therefore, instead of completely disregarding gender discrimination, participants unintentionally seek tactic acceptance of it to ensure that it won't happen to them. In other words, although participants consciously perceive gender discrimination as an unlikely barrier they will encounter at work, they subconsciously accept the potential affects it may have on their working lives by preparing protective strategies, in case they ought to be potential victims of gender discrimination.

#### 4. 4 Potential impact of Gender Discrimination on female career advancement

The interviewed participants were further asked to share their views on what factors may obstruct their career advancement. A common problem many

working women face is their employers' reaction to further commitments such as domestic responsibilities. Female commitment is often assumed unreliable in comparison to men whom forever carry 'single responsibility' (Dodd-McCue et al, 1996). As a result, this prevents many women in middle-management positions from attaining senior hierarchal ranks, known as the 'glass ceiling' effect (Alvesson et al, 1997). When personally questioned about the impact that having a family may have on their career, the majority interviewed, expressed a preference to start a family later in life answering, 'yes, but not for a while' when asked whether or not, they planned on starting a family in the future. When asked 'why', participants made it clear that the start of their career is more important, and that when they feel they have progressed enough, then they may start to think about family relations. Therefore, the majority somewhat agree with literature that domestic responsibilities can hinder the chances to female career advancement, with one interviewee commenting:

'I've got the chance to concentrate on one thing, and that is to build on my career. Why limit my opportunities with further responsibilities?' (P7, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

Whilst female students are somewhat expressing a 'preference' (Hakim, 2000) about starting a family later in life, implicit within that admission is the acknowledgement that if they do not prioritise career over family then they are less likely to advance in their careers. In other words, the participants appear as though their choices are restrained due to their gender since the majority admitted that domestic responsibilities can restrain career advancement. It can be argued, that female students internalise the <https://assignbuster.com/awareness-and-recognition-of-gender-discrimination/>

situation of domestic responsibilities by delaying starting a family in order to increase their likelihood to career advancement, thus accepting its potential consequences. Nonetheless, female students continued to express defensive responses to questions that placed them at a disadvantage when discussing the implications of having family responsibilities, with one participant commenting:

‘ To be honest, equality in the workplace has definitely improved. My mum is a working woman with three children and has been successful in her career. In fact, after maternity leave, the company were adamant for her to come back after maternity leave, because they were happy with her as an employee’ (P2, 3rd Year, Management Studies).

Whilst the majority of those interviewed accepted that domestic responsibilities may negatively impact their chances to career advancement, the participants maintained optimistic and positive in overcoming gender discrimination if family responsibilities were involved in the future. For instance, female students stated the benefits of working from home as one participant commented that, ‘ today, many organisations are considerate towards the balance of work and home lifestyles’ (P7, 3rd year, Management student). Again supporting Crocker et al’s (1989) ‘ attribution ambiguity’ concept, female students engaged in ‘ self-protection’ when negative contributions were made relative to them. Indeed, participants assured workplaces offer opportunities that place women at an advantage where they can ‘ fairly’ climb the corporate ladder alongside their male counterparts. Therefore, participants recognise the consequences of domestic responsibilities, yet reassure themselves that it is an issue they will

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counteract since organisations are assumingly considerate towards working mothers. As a result, participants support Crosby et al (1989) in the view that, women as victims of gender discrimination tend to deem they are personally exempt from the reality of gender bias that operates in society, even if they acknowledge this happens to their group (Crosby et al, 1989). Indeed, when asked if domestic responsibilities can impact career advancement, one participant commented:

‘ Not really, since women are able to combine work and home responsibilities. Many organisations have crèche’s. Perhaps my commitment may sway during maternity leave, but like many other successful women, I will pick myself back up again. At the start of my career I need to prove I’m an employee worth keeping, despite my family obligations’ (P8, 3rd year, Management student).

Again, like the majority, the interviewed participant proposed a strategy to prove her capabilities of being a good employee at the start of her career (and presumably feel once this is achieved) having a family won’t make a severe difference towards career success. As suggested, by amplifying self-esteem, participants enhanced a tactic acceptance of gender discrimination to enforce a positive outcome to their position as women with future domestic responsibilities. Conversely, when participants were asked how domestic responsibilities may impact their chances of selection and promotion, their response was somewhat surprising:

‘ Organisations perceptions of women vary. Unfortunately, there are companies whom may judge me based on my gender, especially if I was to

have children. Presuming that women can't and won't fully commit to the workplace' (P1, 3rd year, Management student).

Interestingly, half of the participants made similar suggestions such as, 'to be honest if I was an employer, I would probably recruit an employee who I know will serve and dedicate fully to the company, and if that's male, then so be it' (P4, 3rd Year, Management Studies). This suggests that, participants not only accept the negative implications domestic responsibilities may have on selection and promotion, they also agree to the gendered selection and recruitment process. The socially constructed stereotype placed upon women, even if their childless, is an uncontrollable matter in which one participant stated: 'Alan Sugar is a perfect example of a typical male employer who basis his recruitment decisions on when young women plan on starting a family' (P2, 3rd Year, Management Studies). When comparing to the above comments, rather than internalising the matter, participants perceive selection and promotion as an issue they cannot overcome; rather they admit, 'women of childbearing ages are a liability' (Times Online, 2008), hence delaying starting a family. Overall, female students believe to advance in their careers, work is first priority. By proving their efforts are just as good as men, their chances of internal opportunities such as selection and promotion are more likely to be granted.

#### 4. 5 Summary

The findings uncovered that the interviewed participants acknowledged gender discrimination exists; however, do not perceive gender discrimination as a likely barrier that they will encounter personally. Female students



underestimated discrimination by expressing self-protected comments when negative contributions placed them at a disadvantage. As a result, participants internalised discrimination through corresponding behaviour to ensure that they will not be personal victims of discrimination and are likely to be more accepted at work. Moreover, the participants' proposed a tactic acceptance of discrimination whereby they attempted to either protect or insulate themselves from its gendered effects to overcome the various discriminative issues many women face today, hence considering gender discrimination as a minor issue. Alternatively, it can be argued that participants subconsciously perceived gender discrimination as a personal concern. By internalising or establishing tactics to prevent gender discrimination, an indirect acceptance of personal discrimination is apparent, since participants plan solutions to resolve the matter in case it was to happen to them. Nonetheless, female students' responses directly demonstrate that they do not perceive gender discrimination as a likely obstruction they will personally encounter at work, thus perceiving it as an unrelated matter.

## **Chapter Five- Conclusion**

In conclusion, despite the reality of gender discrimination whereby women 'as leaders in industry, business, and the public sector continue to be underrepresented' (Probert, 2005), female Management undergraduates have presented a naive discernment of gender discrimination by, underestimating the various discriminative issues that may personally take effect during their working lives. The dissertation findings revealed key themes relative to female students' perceptions of gender discrimination in

relation to, their level of awareness and recognition, the extent female students perceive gender discrimination on self, and, how if gender discrimination did occur, may it impact their career advancement. Unlike, Sipe et al (2009) whom argued, female undergraduates disregard gender discrimination, the interviewed participants in this dissertation, recognised the negative effects of stereotyping, pay and domestic responsibilities socially and somewhat personally. Particularly, female students are currently aware and accept that gender discrimination may be a challenge for working women to advance in their careers. However, similar to the former study, the results established that, female Management students do not perceive gender discrimination as a barrier they will encounter in their careers.

Astonishingly, female students perceived gender discrimination as being of little consequence within their own working lives since they positively internalise the situation to make it work for them. By specialising in 'feminine' careers, such as marketing (Bible et al, 2007), or even, starting a family later in life, female students believe they are more accepted and likely to advance in their careers, thus avoiding the risks of gender discrimination. Therefore, participants perceive gender discrimination as an issue they are able to overcome if they work within its gendered effects rather than against it, hence disregarding the issue as a personal problem. As such, considering a feminist perspective, radical feminists in particular would be very disillusioned by such responses as participants seem to simply accept prejudice exists, and indeed are seeking to change themselves in order to better suit the workplace, rather than challenge the system. Furthermore, the majority of the participants' underestimated the possibility of being

victims of discrimination by expressing self-protected responses to ensure they are not personal members of a disadvantaged group. Participants were reluctant to accept being victims of discrimination as they optimistically developed strategies to prevent confronting the various discriminative issues that they suggested women as a social group experience at work, thus placing themselves at an advantage in comparison to 'other' women. This supports the 'personal/group discrimination discrepancy' concept, proposed by Taylor et al, (1990) as female students, perceived a higher level of discrimination aimed at their group members, compared with them as individuals. Then again, as participants accept gender discrimination exists amongst women as a social group, it can also be argued that, female students' indirectly implement and accept gender discrimination as being personally relevant during their working lives. Indeed, by internalising and developing tactics to overcome the situation, female students are subconsciously preparing ways to prevent the consequences of gender discrimination, in case it happens to them. Accordingly, their responses unintentionally show a tactic acceptance of personal gender discrimination rather than a complete rejection, as they state they will not be victims of discrimination but then, continuously develop strategies to ensure they won't.

Overall, the established findings of this dissertation research seem to be somewhat worrying, since final year female Management students outspokenly underestimate the potential consequences of personal discrimination. This attitude amongst current female undergraduates is consistent with Carr et al's (2003) study which reported that, women

professionals considered themselves to have been unprepared through their early experiences and educational years for the types of gender discrimination they experienced during their working lives (Carr et al, 2003). Relatively, although female students somewhat accept the effects of gender discrimination; their responses still express naivety towards the matter when determining gender discrimination on self. Thus, female students optimistically believe the gender inequality gap has sincerely improved, will continue to improve and likely to close by the time they enhance during their professional years. If continued perceiving the matter as unrelated, current female students may risk real opportunities to correct gender discrimination through training, enforcement, and premeditated human-resource planning during their careers. Thus, female students in the future should be appropriately educated and better prepared for the work realities of various discriminatory employment practices. Therefore, whilst this dissertation research disseminates towards young women whom are likely to benefit from this topic by anticipating gender discrimination before entering their professional careers. It also targets and encourages employers to pay more attention to the matter by continuing making conscious efforts to educate future employees about the realities of workplace discrimination, and address gender discrimination effectively through policies, training and enforcement. It is in my contention that if female students are consc