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Barriers Women Face at Work: A cursory review of the literature

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Barriers Women Face at Work: A cursory review of the literature

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Management

Bridgewater State University

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ABSTRACT

“Whether there are female leadership styles...is not really the right question. It is more important to ask why there has been so little attention paid to women leaders over the years as well as why the styles of leading more often exhibited by women are particularly useful at this critical moment in history” ~Charlotte Bunch

In the United States, women have been making steady gains in the workforce for more than 40 years (Ho, 2018). Despite this fact, women continue to face discrimination when it comes to leadership roles in the upper ranks of organizations (Ho, 2018). Noting these challenges, this thesis aims to highlight the most significant career barriers facing women at work. Therefore, I explore the degree to which employment attitudes improved over the past two decades. Accordingly, this thesis will provide a cursory review of the gender and employment literature, hitting major topics such as: (1) child-rearing, and (2) workplace flexibility, as examples.

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the experience of becoming a mother is one of the most magical and rewarding experiences in a young woman’s life. At that moment, expecting mothers realize that nothing is the same, and it never will be. However, for the mother of that precious baby, daily life becomes more of a struggle, especially if the mother has a career and strives to support her family (van der Gaag, 2014). Research suggests women face a significant number of conflicts in areas such as pay inequity (Bellas & Reskin, 1994), power (Stromquist, 2005), and voice (Denton & Zeytinoglu, 1993). The overall stigma that “women should stay at home and care for

their children” is one of the primary factors believed to cause many of these challenges (van der Gaag, 2014).

Child-Rearing Barriers.

Although researchers have long argued that gender should not be a deciding factor as to who the stay at home parent is, nor should it stand in the way of earning a steady income for ones’ family, studies show that a considerable amount of child-rearing care falls on the shoulders of women, increasing the difficulties associated with balancing work and family obligations (Olsen, Maples, & Stage, 1998). Yet, while there have been many improvements to women’s abilities to obtain employment, Slaughter, from Time Magazine, states the following:

“Poor women have always carried the dual burden of paid and unpaid work; rich women have often paid others to provide care. But middle-class women have been caught in between, barely able to survive on one wage but still expected to put in the “second shift” of care work after their first shift of paid work is over. These same women are expected to have a baby on a Friday and return to work the following Monday, unless they can cobble together vacation, sick leave and — with a sympathetic employer — maybe a few weeks of voluntary maternity leave” (Slaughter, 2018).

Noting the above commentary, one might ask how does that make sense? An abundance of parenting research shows caring for a child/family is a full-time job to the extent that it involves things such as, “Physical tasks — bathing, dressing, feeding, physical and mental exercise — for the very young, the very old, the ill and the disabled” (Slaughter, 2018). However, when a woman has a baby, it is often the case that she is expected to stay at home with her child and possibly quit her day job. And yet very few employers will go to great lengths to accommodate a women’s need to take care of her child and work. For example, the Pew Research Center has found generally mixed support for caretaking and childrearing across all stages of women’s careers. In a national survey of 1,835

adults, 40 percent of respondents suggested it was better for women to wait until they were established in their careers before having children (Livingston, 2015). Other research suggests men are less likely to hire women with or who are expecting children (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). In summary, childrearing seems to represent the largest obstacle impacting working women.

The question becomes, why does she have to experience the hardships of parenting in a way that is different for a man? Company provided services such as daycare should be available for low costs and made more accessible to women with children. Not only does child care provide immense help to the mother, in that it frees her up to focus on other important priorities, but it also helps the child to the degree that he or she is receiving stable and consistent care. According to Slaughter:

“Providing affordable, accessible, high-quality childcare, together with long-enough leave to allow mothers and fathers to bond with their children after birth, also shapes young brains in ways that determines their potential for lifelong learning, emotional stability and resilience. That means that every dollar we invest in early education is a dollar that will return lifelong benefits in terms of reduced social costs and increased human capital” (Slaughter, 2018).

Making child care easily available to families with children is an easy fix to the issue of women leaving work to take care of their children. Slaughter argues that, “Something bold and broad, like the Universal Family Care plan, which would provide flexible assistance for child care, long-term care and paid family and medical leave for all

who need it (Slaughter, 2018). With these changes, women would be able to stay at work, doing what they love, paid and unpaid. Not only will they get to spend time with a brand-new family, they will be able to provide for their family.

Workplace Flexibility.

Research also shows caregiving responsibilities can be made easier with helpful workplace policies that allow flexibility. The research defines flexibility as “the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks” (Hill, Jacob, Shannon, Brennan, Blanchard, & Martinengo, 2008, pp. 149). Previous research demonstrates that workplace flexibility can reduce reactivity to stressors for employees, which is a state frequently experienced by many working parents without sufficient child-rearing resources (e.g., Almelda & Davis, 2011; Hill et al., 2008). There are lots of ways workplace flexibility can be created in organizations, such as jobshares or flexcareers. In the case of the former, two people share the responsibilities and pay/benefits of one position on temporary basis whereas the latter, a person leaves their position for a period of time but is assured of access to re-entry later. This can greatly increase workplace flexibility for women (e.g., Christensen & Schneider, 2011; Hill et al., 2008). However, some researchers have suggested that workplace flexibility is not helpful to the advancement of women of color (Bellas & Toutkoushian, 1999; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008) because they often take on extra roles service roles, such as mentoring and being part of ethnic/racial programming activities. White women do not necessarily have to take on these additional responsibilities, and they do not experience penalties for not doing so.

New Developments.

Another issue is that many companies are losing talented female employees to having children, and are thus losing valuable human capital in their organizations. Slaughter states that, “Child care for two children now costs more than rent in the majority of the U.S, steadily driving women out of the workforce because they cannot afford to leave their homes. That means we are rapidly losing valuable talent that would otherwise contribute to innovation, productivity and growth” (Slaughter, 2018).

Another article on this subjects suggests why Trump’s Paid Parental Leave Plan Won’t Work for Women and Families. The authors, S. Frothingham and R. West write:

“Despite claiming that the cost of the parental leave proposal is “fully offset,” the Trump administration pushes the program’s cost onto states while failing to specify how states are expected to finance it. This new pressure will further strain state resources, and risks reducing the benefits available under the Trump paid leave proposal or states’ UI programs—or both...The end result is a proposal that would exclude millions of working families—those with caregiving needs not covered by the plan, those who would not be able to afford to take leave given the program’s meager expected benefits, and potentially those who are not eligible for UI” (Frothingham & West, 2017).

The plan, if put into place, would exclude many families, making it less beneficial to the issue. It will also likely exclude certain categories of women. The authors go on to state:

“According to Trump’s budget, his proposal apparently would rely on states to establish eligibility standards to determine who could access the proposed new parental leave benefit through their existing UI programs. But states’ UI programs fail to cover a huge swath of today’s workers, in large part because many states tightened eligibility criteria and restricted access in response to the financial challenges of the Great Recession. As a result, in recent years, a historically low one in four unemployed workers received UI benefits nationwide—and in 13 states, this number was less than one in five. Therefore, if Trump’s plan requires workers to qualify for UI, many of the workers and families who need paid leave the most may not be eligible for it. This includes women, who are already disproportionately excluded from UI protections because of how much they work and how much they earn” (Frothingham & West, 2017).

If this plan excludes women--the main people affected by this issue--how is that helping the issue? Research conducted by G. Powell (2003), suggests that in 2010, "The proportion of women managers may remain below 50%. On the other hand, if family life becomes less constraining or if women forgo family lives to pursue managerial careers, this proportion could rise above 50%" (Powell, 2010). Powell's points suggest that if they are increasing the number of women managers in the United States, then making daycare available and affordable, as well as realizing that women are assets just like men, are better options to solve the problem at hand.

The discrepancy in opportunities, status, attitudes, etc., between men and women, also known as the gender gap, is another issue that continues to cause problems for women and their careers. Women of the United States of America have been a part of the working world for over 30 years. However, as things continue to change, the gender gap still prevails. This creates less opportunities, less pay, less promotions, and unequal positions for women of America.

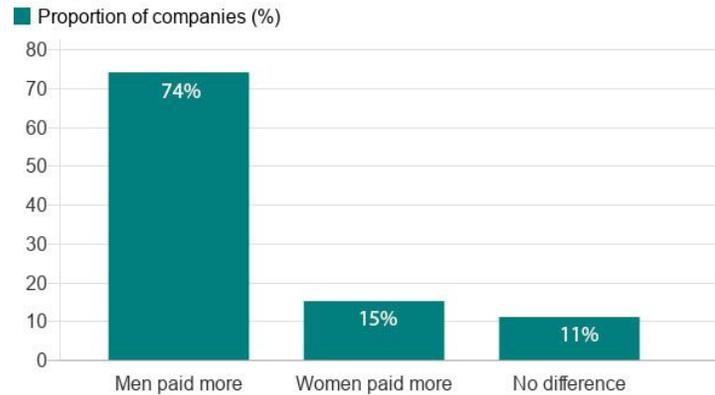
Men and women of the same background, with the same skills and qualifications, do not have equal jobs, positions, or pay, because of the gender gap. Women are less likely to be promoted and because they never get the opportunity to have the same job as a male colleague, they get paid much less. According to BBC, "Unlike pay inequality - which compares the wages of men and women doing the same job - a gender pay difference at a company is not illegal, but could possibly reflect discrimination" (BBC, 2018). This statement shows that unequal pay is legal as long as the male and female are not doing the same job. This is surprising because it is still a form of discrimination that is legal today.

Even though times are changing, companies continue to discriminate against women and hold them back from their full potential on purpose. BBC also states, "The government data showed 74% of firms pay higher rates to their male staff. Just 15% of businesses with more than

250 employees pay more to women. As many as 11% of firms said there is no difference between the rates paid to either gender” (BBC, 2018). This statement suggests that while more than half of the companies in the United States pay men more money than women, only about a tenth of the companies have equal pay, and only a small number pay women more money than men. This is surprising because as time goes on more and more issues continue to be fixed and made better, but why not this one? A person should be hired based on their qualifications and skills and education, not what they look like on the outside. Companies should not discriminate against things that women have no control over, they should be willing to help women succeed (Schieder & Gould, 2016).

Even though companies still discriminate against women in the work place, there are consequences. According to BBC, “By law, all firms with more than 250 staff must report their gender pay gap to the government by 4 April this year. So far only 1,047 firms have complied, leaving another 8,000 to go” (BBC, 2018). This shows that companies still have to report their discrimination. It is surprising that they continue to discriminate, even after reporting it because it is embarrassing for them.

Almost three quarters of UK companies pay men more than they pay women



Source: Government Equalities Office data for the 1,047 companies with more than 250 employees that have reported so far. **BBC**

Adapted from www.google.com

Pay is not the only thing that hinders a woman's chance of succeeding in the work place, promotions are a huge factor of the gender gap as well. According Bryce Covert:

“Authors Astrid Kunze and Amalia R. Miller examined private sector employment data from Norway, known as a generally women-friendly country, between 1987 and 1997. They found that even when controlling for industry, occupation, age, education, experience, tenure, and whether workers are full or part time, women are 2.9 percentage points less likely to get a promotion than men. On top of that, they found that ‘[f]or men, fatherhood is associated with a greater chance of promotion,’ but for women, “children have a negative effect on promotion rates and that effect is even more negative if they are younger” (Covert, 2014).

The observations above state that women are less likely to be promoted than men, and that even if a women sticks with one company for a long time, her chances of getting promoted still are not high (Covert, 2014). Covert also states, “Since the data for the study was collected, Norway and some other countries have implemented a gender quotas for women on boards, seeking in part to increase women's representation in firms generally by promoting women in leadership” (Covert, 2014). This may be a good way to address the issue at hand.

Another article called “Why Don't More Women Get Promoted?”, by Maria LaMagna, states that “In 2017, women were 21% more likely to achieve “top performer” status than men, up from 12% in 2015. Among managers, women came out even further ahead: Women who were managers in 2017 were 22% more likely than male managers to be rated as “top performers.” And yet women under 40 were less likely than men to receive a promotion, Visier found (LaMagna, 2018). The author of this article wanted people to know that women are more likely to be the successful ones in a company, but they are not the ones getting promoted.

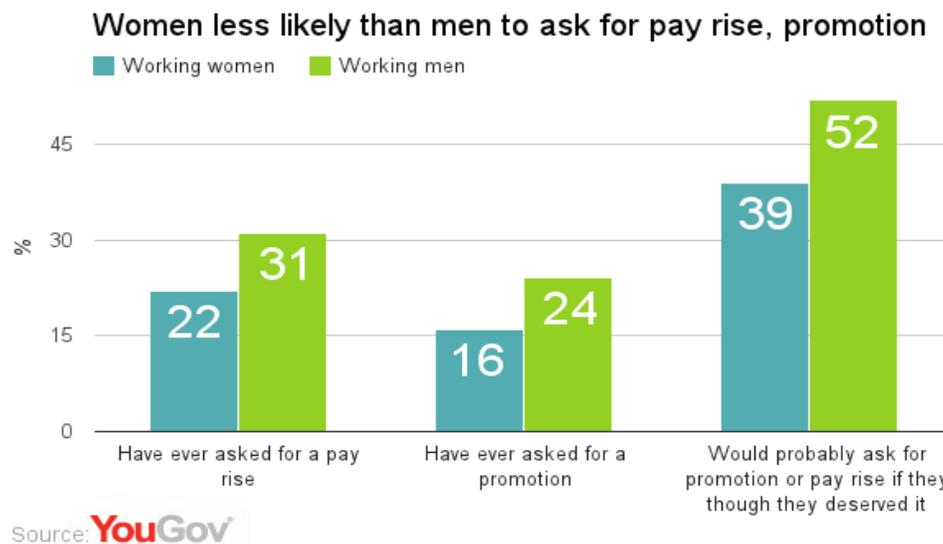
LaMagna goes on to say that the reason for this is, “Women are more likely than men to take steps back — or leave the workforce entirely — when they have children, said Josie Sutcliffe, the vice president of marketing at Visier” (LaMagna, 2018). This statement may be true for most families, however, why do women have to be the one to quit their jobs or lower their hours? Why not men? LaMagna also states that only 28% of men lower their hours to take care of their child (LaMagna, 2018). This shows that more women leave work than men.

There is still hope for women, even though they do not get promoted as often as men. As women get older the demand for childcare is decreased. This gives women more time to take on big promotions. Studies find that women over 40 are more likely to get promoted over men, as opposed to women under 40 who are more likely to have children to take care of (LaMagna, 2018).

When it comes to managers, it is more common for men to be managers than women. It was reported that in 2017 only 12 percent of women held manager positions, compared to 18 percent of men (LaMagna, 2018) This shows that even if women can eventually get a higher position, men are given the opportunity first.

When it comes to higher paying jobs, “Women are also avoiding some high-paying fields, such as engineering in part because they believe they won’t be supported in those industries”, according to a study in the *American Educational Research Journal* (LaMagna, 2018). This shows that women are afraid to go after their dreams and what they are good at because of the gender gap. According to the article *The Real Reason Women Avoid Careers in Math and Science*, by Moynihan, “The upshot of this research is neither especially feminist nor especially sad: It’s not that gender equality discourages girls from pursuing science. It’s that it allows them not to if they’re not interested” (Moynihan, 2018).

Women are being pressured to hold back on their full potential (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013). They are scared to ask for a raise or a promotion at the major chance of getting declined (Saner, 2010). This picture shows the difference between men and women asking for a raise or a promotion:



Adapted from <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2013/11/03/time-lean-women-behind-men-seeking-advancement->

The world is continuing to change for the better of woman's rights. According to LaMagna, "Of all the CEOs who were replaced in 2017, women made up 18% of their replacements, up from 15.3% in 2015, according to research from global outplacement consultancy firm Challenger, Grey & Christmas" (LaMagna, 2018).

A question commonly asked by workers of America is: Does your gender hinder your chances to advance at work? And the answer is: it probably depends on whether you're asking a man or a woman (Carpenter, 2017). According J. Carpenter, "Around 39% of women said their gender 'will make it harder to get a raise, a promotion or a step ahead'" (Carpenter, 2017). The author goes on to say that, "Women were also less likely to say they had equal opportunity for growth in the workplace" (Carpenter, 2017). The author of this article wanted the audience to know that it is harder for women to get promoted than men.

Carpenter gave tips on how to fight subtle sexism in the office. Rachel Thomas states that subtle sexism is caused when men in high positions see little opportunity (in their own opinions) for women leadership (Carpenter, 2017). This author states that "18% of women aren't being promoted, and only one in five senior leaders are women and less than one in 30 senior leaders are women of color" (Carpenter, 2017).

It is hard enough getting a promotion as a women, but when you add race into the mix of things it is even harder. According to J. Carpenter,

"Advancement is particularly challenging for women of color. The report's findings point out several obstacles: women of color are less likely to be promoted than their white peers, perhaps because they're also less likely to have contact with senior executives in their organizations" (Carpenter, 2017).

This quote shows that women of color do not get promoted nearly as much as white women, and it is hard enough for them to get a promotion as it is.

Finally, according to J. Carpenter, mentorship plays a huge role in this issue. Carpenter states, “Women felt that they were far less likely to find a mentor than men did, and we see that mentorship could play a tremendous role in career advancement” (Carpenter, 2017). This quote proves that women need a mentor to help them in their career, just as much as men do.



Adapted from Women's Liberation March in Washington, D.C., Aug. 26, 1970 / Photo: U.S. News & World Report. Copyright 1970.

What the balance of the findings above point to is an unofficially acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession--the glass ceiling.

Many of the barriers attributed to the glass ceiling can also be linked to sexism, more generally. For example, research from, the University of Chicago Booth School of Business “finds while there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that sexism has prevented many talented

women from achieving their full potential at work, there are factors beyond gender discrimination in the workplace that are holding women back” (Bertrand, 2018). Some of those According to Chicago Booth Professor Marianne Bertrand, "Talent is left on the table when women are not placed in leadership positions, and the economy suffers" (Bertrand, 2018). The main issues that Bertrand states in her working paper are:

- Women with college degrees often choose to work in fields that offer lower incomes (Bertrand, 2018).
- Psychological differences between men and women could account for up to 10 percent of the pay gap. (Bertrand, 2018).
- The demands for child care, housework and other life chores outside of work fall more heavily on women than on men. (Bertrand, 2018).

There is also the issue of the lesser known “glass cliff”. The “glass cliff” is a term founded by researchers, Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, in 2005. It is when women are being falsely represented in untenable leadership positions (The Whawell, 2018). This is a new term stepping up to the plate that is the outcome of breaking the glass ceiling.

The glass cliff is basically when women receive a leadership position and are set up for failure. It is almost worse than the glass ceiling because it gives women a bad rep and causes them to be demoted and shunned.

The author states that, “Subsequent research in an array of environments has demonstrated that this is not an isolated issue, nor is it unique to certain industries or geographical locations. It reveals that women in top leadership positions seem to be routinely

handed inherently unsolvable problems” (Whawell, 2018). This proves that once women get a leadership role, they are set up for failure.

CONCLUSION

This thesis covered the challenges women face in the business world, such as child support and pay equality. Women still face these issues today, however, they are slowly being resolved. We should make men and women have equal pay and provide child support for families that is affordable. I learned that as a women going into the business world, I will face some issues if I want to start a family. I also learned to fight for my right of equal pay to men. In the future, I hope more and more companies realize that women are just as valuable as men if not more so. Until, then women should band together to fight for what is right and what is just, whether it be equal pay or just voicing our own opinions. I believe in change and so should you!

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