INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT (IJBM)
ISSN: 2815-9330 (Online)

VOL. 5, NO. 4 2026 https://iessociety.org/

Gender discrimination in the workplace: A narrative review of challenges, coping strategies, and ethical organizational responses

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Abstract

Gender discrimination persists in organizations even as women's labor force participation has grown, raising ethical questions that extend beyond legal compliance. This paper presents a narrative literature review of peer reviewed studies published since 2009 on women's workplace challenges, coping strategies, and the ethical responsibilities of organizations. From approximately 190 initial records, 52 were screened and 31 articles were retained for full text review and grouped into three themes: workplace challenges, coping strategies and organizational responses, and ethical behavior and organizational culture. The literature shows that gender stereotypes, occupational segregation, harassment, motherhood bias, restricted access to leadership, and intersectional disadvantage continue to shape women's careers. Recent work shows that stereotypes impose a double penalty on perceived competence and acceptable behavior, and that diversity initiatives focused on a single identity category can leave unequal status processes intact. Individual coping cannot substitute for structural reform. The paper argues that organizations should move from compliance driven approaches toward ethical leadership, credible and confidential reporting, practice based training, audits of promotion and pay systems, and executive accountability. The review is a conceptual synthesis rather than an estimate of prevalence, and its search was limited to two university library systems.

***Keywords*:** Gender Discrimination, Workplace Harassment, Ethical Leadership, Organizational Ethics, Gender Stereotypes, Intersectionality, Women's Leadership, Organizational Culture

JEL Classification: J71, J16, M14

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.56879/ijbm.v5i4.203

1. Introduction

While women's labor force participation has expanded considerably, workplace equity has failed to advance at a commensurate pace. Gender discrimination continuously compromises hiring, compensation, promotion, task allocation, leadership access, and interpersonal treatment. Consequently, mitigating this issue is not merely a matter of legal compliance but a fundamental mandate of organizational ethics. Managers and researchers must critically evaluate how informal organizational practices continuously disadvantage women even when formal equality is legally codified. This systematic review addresses this discrepancy by synthesizing contemporary literature on women's workplace challenges, coping responses, and organizational ethics. The insights are highly consequential for business management; unaddressed discrimination degrades organizational commitment, increases voluntary turnover, erodes corporate culture, and undermines the institutional credibility of formal ethics programs.

Earlier foundational research characterizes gendered expectations, occupational segregation, workplace harassment, and glass ceilings as structural, persistent concerns. Contemporary scholarship deepens this framework by demonstrating that gender stereotypes manifest through both descriptive expectations (assumptions about a gender's traits) and prescriptive expectations (dictates on how a gender should behave). Specifically, Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi (2024) establish that women are routinely judged as incompatible with roles requiring stereotypically masculine traits, yet face social and professional penalties if they violate conventional expectations of femininity. This dual penalty underscores why merely increasing female representation cannot dismantle deeply embedded, discriminatory organizational processes. Accordingly, the purpose of this systematic review is to integrate the ethical and organizational dimensions of workplace gender discrimination. By converting synthesized qualitative findings into actionable frameworks, this paper provides strategic implications for managers, human resource practitioners, and organizational architects. Ultimately, this review contributes to the field by bridges individual lived experiences of discrimination with macro-level organizational systems, ethical leadership frameworks, and proactive culture management.

2. Methodology

This study followed a systematic literature review design using narrative synthesis. Searches were conducted through the Pennsylvania State University Libraries and the Bloomsburg University/Commonwealth University Library System. Inclusion criteria consisted of English-language, peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical articles published in 2009 or later that addressed women's workplace experiences, gender harassment, workplace discrimination, or organizational ethics. Non-peer-reviewed reports, opinion essays, commentary, studies unrelated to workplace gender experiences, and studies focused exclusively on men or non-work contexts were excluded. Initial results included approximately 190 articles. After removal of duplicates and abstract screening, 52 articles were screened further and 31 articles were retained for full-text review.

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A narrative synthesis was used rather than a quantitative meta-analysis because the retained studies varied in their designs, concepts, and outcomes. Key concepts were coded and grouped into three analytical themes: (1) challenges faced by women in the workplace, (2) coping skills and organizational responses, and (3) ethical behavior and organizational culture. The analysis emphasized recurring findings across the reviewed literature rather than estimating a pooled effect size. The review should therefore be interpreted as a conceptual synthesis of the selected literature rather than as an estimate of the prevalence or magnitude of workplace discrimination.

Because the original review did not record a formal database-by-database search string, screening software, or inter-rater reliability procedure, those elements are not claimed here. This limitation is important for interpreting the review as a narrative synthesis and identifies an opportunity for a future review to adopt a fully reproducible systematic-review protocol.

3. Findings

3.1 Theme One: Workplace Challenges

The literature identifies gender bias, occupational segregation, harassment, unequal advancement opportunities, motherhood-related bias, and intersectional disadvantage as recurring workplace challenges. Women in male-dominated occupations continue to experience barriers to advancement and may encounter organizational cultures in which masculine behavior is treated as the default. Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh, and Magliozzi (2018) describe how professional women may navigate workplace constraints through forms of intentional invisibility, while Desai, Chugh, and Brief (2014) demonstrate that gender ideology can influence men's attitudes toward women's advancement.

The contemporary literature reinforces the importance of gender stereotypes in explaining these patterns. Heilman et al. (2024) synthesize evidence showing that stereotypes can produce a perceived lack of fit between women and male gender-typed jobs. Women may also face a behavioral double bind: assertiveness or authority that is valued in leaders may be interpreted negatively when displayed by women. This finding is important for business organizations because leadership development programs can unintentionally reproduce the very stereotypes they seek to overcome if women are taught to adapt to masculine norms rather than if organizational norms are changed. Leadership representation is another continuing concern. Earlier studies in the review indicate that men have held a disproportionate share of management positions and that women may receive fewer opportunities involving authority, difficult assignments, or advancement. Harassment can become particularly salient when women enter occupations or positions traditionally associated with men. Dresden, Dresden, Ridge, and Yamawaki (2017) found greater gender bias and harassment toward women in male-dominated academic majors. Workplace harassment can include sexist jokes, derogatory comments, unwanted sexual attention, and conduct that creates a hostile environment. The original review also identified the movement of harassment into digital communication and social media as an emerging organizational concern,

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making clear policies and reporting mechanisms increasingly important. Discrimination also intersects with race, social class, and family roles. Ortiz and Roscigno (2009) found that workplace discrimination varies across race and class, illustrating why gender cannot always be examined as a single social category. Similarly, research on pregnancy and motherhood indicates that women may face assumptions about commitment and career priorities when they have family responsibilities (Jones, 2017; Little et al., 2015). Berdahl and Bhattacharyya (2024) provide a recent extension of this intersectional perspective by demonstrating that organizational status judgments can be shaped jointly by gender and race. Their findings suggest that diversity initiatives focused on one identity category may be insufficient when organizational practices reproduce broader systems of inequality.

3.2 Theme Two: Coping Strategies and Organizational Responses

Coping strategies can help employees manage the consequences of discrimination and harassment, but the literature indicates that individual coping should not substitute for organizational reform. Wang et al. (2016) found that workplace harassment can be associated with anger and retaliatory responses, with consequences for employee relationships and organizational functioning. Coping strategies that support recovery, constructive communication, and appropriate reporting can therefore be valuable, particularly when employees have access to trustworthy organizational processes.

Organizational structures can either reduce or intensify the burden placed on individuals. Avendaño (2018) argues that labor unions can strengthen protection against sexual harassment by incorporating clear anti-harassment provisions, cultural change efforts, training, and procedures for reporting unethical behavior. Organizations can also support women through mentoring, development opportunities, flexible work arrangements, and family-supportive practices. However, these interventions are most effective when they are accompanied by accountability for supervisors and decision makers rather than being framed solely as services that women must use to adapt to existing structures.

The ethical implication is important: asking targets of discrimination to become more resilient without changing the conditions that produce discrimination can shift responsibility from the organization to the individual. A more ethical approach recognizes employee agency while simultaneously addressing organizational causes. Managers should ensure that reporting systems are confidential and credible, retaliation is prohibited and addressed, and complaints are evaluated consistently. Training should also move beyond awareness alone by providing opportunities to practice decision making, recognize bias, and respond appropriately to workplace scenarios.

3.3 Theme Three: Ethical Behavior and Organizational Culture

Ethical behavior requires more than written policies. The reviewed literature emphasizes the importance of organizational culture, ethical leadership, employee education, and opportunities

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for individuals to examine their values and behavior. Douglas (2004) argues that diversity work involves more than legal compliance and requires attention to how employees understand difference, dignity, and respect. From this perspective, ethical organizational behavior is strengthened when employees are encouraged to recognize the consequences of their decisions and when leaders model the standards they expect from others. Ethical leadership is especially important because employees interpret managerial behavior as evidence of what the organization actually values. Plinio, Young, and Lavery (2010) emphasize the need for clear expectations, ethics programs, leadership commitment, and organizational cultures that reinforce ethical behavior. Similarly, Dziubaniuk and Nyholm (2021) demonstrate the value of constructivist approaches to teaching sustainability and business ethics, supporting the broader proposition that ethical understanding is strengthened when learners actively engage with ethical issues rather than merely memorize rules.

Recent research adds an important caution to organizational diversity initiatives. Berdahl and Bhattacharyya (2024) found that status judgments can be influenced by intersecting gender and racial beliefs, indicating that representation alone does not guarantee equitable organizational outcomes. Consequently, organizations should evaluate whether promotion, recognition, evaluation, and leadership processes actually distribute opportunities fairly. Ethical behavior should be embedded in recruitment, performance evaluation, promotion, leadership development, and disciplinary procedures rather than isolated in annual compliance training. Training design also matters. Bedwell, Fiore, and Salas (2014) emphasize information, demonstration, practice, and feedback as components of effective interpersonal-skills training. Applied to gender discrimination, this approach suggests that employees should not simply receive definitions of harassment and bias; they should practice responding to realistic situations and receive feedback on their decisions. Role-play, case analysis, scenario-based discussion, and structured reflection can help employees translate ethical principles into workplace behavior.

4. Conclusion

Gender discrimination remains an ethical, organizational, and social challenge even as women's participation and representation in the workforce have increased. The literature reviewed in this study identifies three interconnected areas: the challenges women experience, the coping strategies available to them, and the organizational conditions required for ethical behavior. Gender stereotypes, occupational segregation, harassment, motherhood-related expectations, and intersectional inequalities continue to influence workplace experiences. Recent evidence confirms that gender stereotypes can affect both perceptions of competence and evaluations of women's behavior, while intersectional processes can shape who receives status and opportunity (Heilman et al., 2024; Berdahl & Bhattacharyya, 2024).

For business organizations, meaningful progress requires more than formal policies. Ethical leadership, accountable decision making, effective training, equitable advancement systems,

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credible reporting procedures, and an inclusive organizational culture must operate together. Organizations that embed these practices into everyday management can reduce the likelihood that discrimination is normalized and can strengthen employee trust and organizational effectiveness. The central ethical responsibility is therefore not simply to respond when discrimination occurs, but to design workplace systems in which dignity, fairness, and respect are consistently reflected in organizational decisions and relationships.

5. Managerial and Ethical Implications

The synthesis has several implications for business and management practice. First, organizations should treat gender discrimination as an organizational ethics issue rather than solely as a legal risk. Compliance is necessary, but it does not guarantee fairness in informal interactions, advancement decisions, task allocation, or leadership evaluation. Second, organizations should audit promotion, compensation, performance evaluation, and access to developmental opportunities for patterns that may disadvantage women. Third, leadership accountability should be explicit: managers should be evaluated not only on financial and operational outcomes but also on their ability to maintain respectful and equitable workplaces.

Fourth, organizations should redesign training so that it develops practical ethical decision-making skills. Training should include contemporary examples of gender bias, intersectional discrimination, harassment in digital communication, bystander intervention, reporting procedures, and retaliation prevention. Fifth, organizations should strengthen confidential reporting systems and communicate clearly how complaints are investigated and resolved. Finally, organizations should avoid placing the primary burden of adaptation on women. Career development, mentoring, flexible work practices, and leadership opportunities should be available as organizational resources while structural barriers are addressed.

For business education, the findings also support integrating gender equity and ethical decision making into management curricula. Students preparing for supervisory roles should learn to identify gender stereotypes, evaluate organizational policies, recognize intersectional disadvantage, and consider stakeholder consequences when making personnel decisions. Such preparation can help future managers view ethical leadership as an ongoing organizational practice rather than a compliance requirement.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The search was conducted through two university library systems, the inclusion criteria emphasized English-language literature published from 2009 onward, and the synthesis retained 31 articles for full-text review. The study therefore does not claim to represent all international research on gender discrimination. The narrative synthesis also does not provide quantitative estimates of effect sizes. Future research should expand database coverage, incorporate multilingual studies, use transparent systematic-review protocols where appropriate, and examine

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how organizational interventions affect measurable outcomes such as promotion, retention, employee well-being, reporting behavior, and perceptions of ethical climate.

Acknowledgement

No external funding or grant support was reported for this study.

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