At Sam’s Club, no girls allowed: the lived experience of sex discrimination

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of sex discrimination from the perspective of women in the Wal-Mart case and unravels the daily mechanisms through which sex discrimination takes place.

Design/methodology/approach – One hundred and ten in-depth statements from women who are current and former employees of Wal-Mart, describing in detail their work experience, were employed as the main source of data. We have carried out a detailed content analysis of these in-depth interviews identifying the mechanisms of sex discrimination.

Findings – Findings identify the specific mechanisms through which sex discrimination takes place. In the context of the current sex discrimination case, the paper provides a rich body of evidence in unraveling the everyday mechanisms of sex discrimination. It observes that instead of individual events, at important thresholds, sex discrimination is a result of small, everyday acts and gendered assumptions, which often appear supportive and harmless.

Research limitations/implications – The richness of the data provides the unique, empirical opportunity to observe the process in detail, but this paper focuses exclusively on the process, and the end-results remain outside the scope of the paper.

Practical implications – The paper provides a very useful source of information and practical advice for women in the labor force in identifying the supportive, nice and harmless mechanisms and everyday experience of sex discrimination.

Originality/value – This paper exclusively focuses on the process and identifies the mechanisms of sex discrimination using a rich source of qualitative data. It offers empirical evidence in identifying the daily assumptions and everyday mechanisms of sex discrimination. Sex discrimination in the everyday lives are carried out in disguise of harmless, nice and often supportive behavior; therefore this paper offers explanations as to why many women stay in these exploitative jobs as long as they do.

Keywords Sexual discrimination, Workplace, Gender

Paper type Research paper

Donna Adair is a former Wal-Mart employee. With nearly ten years of experience in California and Tennessee stores as a service desk clerk as well as customer service manager and exemplary evaluations that were exceeding expectations, she inquired about possible advancement. The regional vice-president put the matter bluntly: she could not be a manager because she was a woman!

When faced with such blunt unequal outcomes in promotions, benefits or pay, it is not surprising for employees to leave; however, what is interesting is what keeps employees in such jobs. Is sex discrimination experienced only in thresholds (i.e. going up for promotions or pay raise) or is it experienced in the daily lives of the employees?

If it is experienced on a daily basis, then what keeps employees like Donna Adair at the workplace for nearly a decade?

Donna Adair is one of the 110 former and current employees who are the initial plaintiffs in a sex discrimination suit against Wal-Mart, the nation’s largest private
employer. With annual sales of about $250 billion, Wal-Mart has topped the Fortune 500 for the past three years; more than an industry leader: it is an economy leader. Fittingly, this promises to be the single largest sex discrimination case in US history. In June 2005, the case was certified as a class-action suit, and now may include all former and current female employees of Wal-Mart stores, nearly 1.6 million women.

To date, few studies exist on the case and most analysis of the case has relied on aggregate data analysis by the three expert witnesses, statistician Drogin (2003), sociologist Bielby (2003) and economist Bendick (2003) examining, for example, wage gaps and differential promotion patterns based on Wal-Mart's employee data. These analyses focus exclusively on the consequences, namely the unequal pay, promotions and opportunities for men and women as a result of discriminatory behavior. In these studies, the gender inequality is the result that needs to be explained and sex discrimination explains those unequal outcomes.

What is missing, however, an analysis of sex discrimination as a process, as an actual set of daily experiences in the lives of those affected. The lived experience of sex discrimination remains virtually unexplored. First, by understanding the actual daily experience of sex discrimination from the perspective of employees, we can unravel the daily mechanisms of how this reified concept is practiced. The everyday, lived experience of sex discrimination at the workplace can shed some light on the organizational dynamics of sex discrimination. Furthermore, it will help us uncover the assumptions made about gender in the workplace. Such a task will provide valuable empirical support for the understanding of the process of inequality and offer ways to remedy for the future.

Secondly, by understanding the lived experience of sex discrimination over a period of time, we can better comprehend why so many women stay in these exploitative jobs for as long as they do. By documenting the experience of the workplace throughout and understanding their perceptions and explanations of the situation, we can better understand the factors that keep them in those jobs and preserve the existing inequalities.

Therefore, for a comprehensive understanding of sex discrimination, it is imperative to focus on the actual everyday work experience of women in addition to the outcomes. Such a task allows us to uncover the micro-politics of sex discrimination as a set of routine practices, unravel the mechanisms through which sex discrimination takes place and see why so many women stay in those jobs.

**Prior research**

Labor market sex discrimination is defined as: “...two equally qualified individuals are treated differently solely on the basis of their gender” (Blau *et al.*, 2006, p. 203). Sex discrimination in the labor market can result in lower earnings for women (Stanley and Jarrell, 1998; Blau and Kahn, 2004). The first strand of research on sex discrimination, therefore, focuses on the wage disparities between men and women. A substantial body of research attempts to explain the difference in pay for men and women in the USA. Prior inquiries consist of two different approaches: human capital approach and the occupational segregation approach.

The human capital approach attempts to explain gender differences in pay through individual differences which might result in lower productivity (Schultz, 1960; Mincer, 1962; Becker, 1985; Bielby and Bielby, 1988; Becker, 1993) such as differences in formal education (Polachek, 1981; Mincer and Polachek, 1974; Sandell and Shapiro, 1978; Reskin and Padavic, 1994; Light and Ureta, 1995) and years of experience (Treiman and Hartmann, 1981; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; England, 1997). In such explanations, the
lower earnings of women are argued to be the result of lower productivity among women and are often associated with their domestic duties and childcare responsibilities, or by interruptions in employment due to these duties (Berk and Berk, 1979; Mincer and Ofek, 1982; Ross, 1987; Hochschild, 1989; Hersch and Stratton, 1997; Waldfogel, 1998).

Some scholars have also focused on differential preferences of men and women. Filer (1983) argues that different values and personality characteristics predict differential earnings for men and women, hypothesizing that men value monetary gratifications while women tend to value non-monetary gratifications leading to unequal pay. However, the hypothesized effect is an indirect one, where values and preferences predict different types of jobs, which result in unequal pay; the mechanisms through which these values lead to a wage disparity remain unaddressed. A more direct association between values and the wage gap can be observed in a number of studies that examine the relative importance men and women place on earnings and other occupational characteristics. These findings indicate that men place more importance on earning than women do, therefore end up in higher paying jobs (Brenner and Tomkiewicz, 1979; Lueptow, 1980; Peng et al., 1981; Herzog, 1982; Major and Konar, 1984), though some studies fail to find such a difference (Walker et al., 1984). More recently, however, the field has accepted as conclusive Jacobs and Steinberg’s (1990) argument that men and women do not work for different reasons resulting in unequal pay and rejected this line of reasoning.

A second set of explanations, instead of focusing on the characteristics of the employees, focus on occupational differences between men and women. This view argues that the pay differential between men and women is predominantly due to occupational characteristics. The most prominent position of this strand of research argues that the difference in pay between men and women is due to employment in different industries (Blau, 1977; Daymont and Andrisani, 1984; Groshen, 1991; Bayard et al., 2003). Earlier studies show that women are more likely than men to be employed in traditionally feminine occupations which require nurturing social skills and are generally associated with lower pay (Kanter, 1977; Kilbourne et al., 1990; Jacobs and Steinberg, 1990; Steinberg, 1990). In addition to sex segregation by occupation, there is also sex segregation by firm. The disproportional employment of women in lower-wage firms only adds to the gap created by occupational sex segregation (Blau, 1977; Beck et al., 1980; Hodson and England, 1986; Aldrich and Buchele, 1989; Coverdill, 1988; Ferber and Spaeth, 1984). More recent findings suggest that market forces reduce the effects of wage discrimination (Hellerstein et al., 2002).

Gender differences in earnings, however, are not the only way in which sex discrimination is experienced. An important line of research focuses on the differences in promotion and participation between men and women (Blau, 1984; Reskin and Hartmann, 1986; Reskin and Roos, 1990; Groshen, 1991; MacPherson and Hirsch, 1995). Despite the increasing labor force participation rates of women, the highest paying jobs are still dominated by men. In fact, women constitute less than 0.5 per cent of the 4,012 highest paid officers (Fierman, 1990; see also Reskin and Padavic, 1994; England, 1997). Within the Fortune 500 senior management, less than 5 per cent are women and minorities (Reskin and Padavic, 1994). Some scholars argue that the disproportional representation of women in managerial positions is due to the glass ceiling: blocked opportunities for women, while some argue it is due to the sticky floor: keeping women in lower paying jobs (Carrington and Troske, 1995; Cohen et al., 1998; Bertrand and Hallock, 2001). Whether women are less likely to be promoted than men because of the...
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glass ceiling or the sticky floor, the promotion gap between men and women is well established (Phelps, 1972; Kahn and Crosby, 1985; Madden, 1985; Drazin and Auster, 1987; Gutek et al., 1996; Reskin and Kalleberg, 1995). The gender difference in promotions was associated with bias in evaluations, which favors men over women (Nieva and Gutek, 1980). While some scholars argue the difference in promotions is not directly linked with sex discrimination (Tsu and Gutek, 1984; O’Neill, 1985; Swim et al., 1989), many scholars agree that there is discrimination in promotions (Clayton and Crosby, 1992; Crosby, 1982; 1984; Kahn and Crosby, 1985; Roper, 1980).

In addition to prior research that looks into the causes and implications of sex discrimination, a burgeoning strand of research looks into the perception and personal experience of sex discrimination (Tajfel, 1978; Bem, 1981; Gutek and Winter, 1989; Gutek et al., 1996).

Within all these strands of research, male domination, according to Hearn and Parkin (1983; 1987) is analyzed but not explained. For a more comprehensive understanding, it is important to focus on the perception and the every day experience of discrimination to unravel the gendered assumptions in the organization. The final strand of research on sex discrimination focuses exclusively on the process of sex discrimination (Kanter, 1977; Feldberg and Glenn, 1979; MacKinnon, 1979; Ferguson, 1984; Acker, 1988; 1990). In one of the most influential works on the topic, Men and Women of the Corporation, Kanter (1977) shows that gendered outcomes are results of the organizational culture. By focusing on the everyday lives of men and women in a corporation, she identifies that women fill the lower-rank, non-managerial positions or infrequently make an appearance as token managerial positions. The focus on the process sheds light on the structural and organizational assumptions made in the workplace and influences later work in the area. Building on her findings, Ressner (1987) identifies the dual organization of bureaucracies and patriarchy. This view better captures the differential experience of women from men in the same workplace by incorporating the lived experience of sex discrimination. Similarly, by focusing on the experience of sex discrimination, later works like Ferguson (1984) offer a feminist critique of bureaucracies and argue that even though they appear to be neutral, they in fact exhibit traditionally masculine characteristics. Because these gendered everyday realities and inequalities are obscured through gender-neutral terms and assumptions, deconstructing the daily lives and experiences will reveal the gendered assumptions in the workplace. Only though a thorough understanding of the process and the experience of discrimination, can we unravel the gendered symbols and images that justify existing inequalities.

Despite the emphasized importance of understanding the process of sex discrimination, there are often methodological limitations in such an endeavor. As observed in the sex discrimination case against Sears (Milkman, 1986), we do not always have the option of having detailed qualitative data outlining the daily lives of women at the workplace.

This paper aims to focus on the day-to-day experience of sex discrimination and offers a detailed, qualitative understanding of the culture in the workplace in the context of the current Wal-Mart sex discrimination case. It takes advantage of vast, detailed interviews and aims to complement the existing quantitative understanding of the sex discrimination case by offering an analysis of the process of sex discrimination. Through understanding the daily lives of women, we aim to not only identify how women perceived sex discrimination and also mechanisms that kept women in these jobs.
Case history

The class action suit, *Dukes et al. v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.* (No. C-01-2252 MJJ) began in 19 June 2001 in San Francisco, California when seven current and former female employees of Wal-Mart from geographically diverse locations filed a sex discrimination class-action lawsuit in the US District Court for the Northern District of California (San Francisco). The charges were based on systematic discrimination against female employees in promotions, wages and job assignments in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Title VII. In June 2004, the plaintiff’s request to constitute the plaintiffs as a class was accepted, thus making the case the largest class-action suit in the nation’s history.

The plaintiffs’ argument is that Wal-Mart, including its Sam’s Club division, systematically discriminates against female employees – both hourly and salaried – by denial of equal pay and promotions. Such disparities do not take place coincidentally; they are both structural, the result of specific policies and cultural, the expressions of cultural assumptions.

While the quantitative evidence argues for the sex discrimination in results, focusing on the consequences, how they end up with those results and why they kept working in those jobs remains unexplored. The mechanisms and the day-to-day experience of sex discrimination cannot be answered solely by focusing on the consequences. This paper focuses exclusively on this neglected part of sex discrimination: the process and identifies the mechanisms through which sex discrimination takes place and how people stay in these positions.

Methods

For this purpose, we have employed the statements from 110 women collected in the Wal-Mart litigation. The statements are in-depth statements from current and former female employees from geographically diverse 30 states and 201 stores. They are long and detailed interviews with women employees. These detailed statements include detailed information about the everyday work practices, workplace interactions, employer–employee and colleague relationships, therefore provide a valuable source in understanding the women’s perspective and the lived experience of discrimination. We have done an in-depth content analysis and organized these statements in identifying the mechanisms of sex discrimination.

Findings

Connell (1987) defines hegemonic masculinity of institutions as aggressive, goal-oriented, competitive and efficient, instead of supportive, kind and caring. Interestingly, women employees describe the working environment where they experienced sex discrimination to be seemingly nice, supportive and protective. The hegemonic masculinity, according to the women, operated in disguise of being supportive, kind and caring.

First, we observe practices that protect women employees from useful criticism by their solicitous, chivalrous, male supervisors. In the guise of chivalric protection, the women therefore are denied opportunities. Stephanie Odle, a 31-year-old employee remembers:

In March 1997, I transferred to one of the Sam’s Clubs in Las Vegas, Nevada, as the Assistant Manager for the Merchandise Department. Within a few days after arriving in Las Vegas, I was called back to the Riverside store for a meeting with Mr. Carlos Doubleday, Director of Operations; Mr. Carl Brown, Regional Loss Prevention Manager; and Ms. Chris Schilling, an
Assistant Manager at the Riverside store, who was present as a “witness”. During this meeting, I was wrongfully accused of making incorrect audit entries “understating shrinkage,” even though these entries had been approved at the time by Mr. Brown and by Mr. Goodwin. Other male General Managers in the region had made similar entries. At the end of the meeting, Mr. Doubleday asked Mr. Brown and Ms. Schilling to leave the room, and then, Mr. Doubleday told me that he believed that I made the entries because Mr. Brown had told me to, adding, “I’m going to do everything I can to protect you.”

Odle, thus faced differential treatment based on her gender. Odle’s accusation of incorrect entries became possible because of the protective treatment she received from her superiors. When faced with an untrue accusation, she was told she would be protected by her male supervisor. This image of a woman employee in need of protection when faced with an accusation not only infantilizes them but also creates the illusion of women as in need of men’s protection.

Similarly, Karla Rojas, a 41-year-old female employee of Wal-Mart from Texas experienced similar protection when she inquired about a promotion. After she had been working for a while as an assistant manager at the Henderson, Texas, store, when she inquired about a promotion. That is when she was called by her superior, who suggested that she should not do that because he was worried about her work-related stress. Her desire to be promoted to a higher position was not directly turned down, nor did she face animosity; however, she was told nicely to quit instead of working and choose to settle down with a family because work life is too stressful for her. This is presented to her as a chivalric concern for her health and well-being, coming from a male superior.

Claudia Renati, too, inquired about managerial positions, during the time she worked at the Pace Store in Roseville, California in 1993. When she asked the Director of Operations Bob Alderman about the management promotion program, she, too, was not turned down immediately, but when I asked about getting into the program, she was told that she would have to be willing to relocate to Alaska, which might disrupt her family. The response to her wish to be promoted is declined indirectly in disguise of showing concern for her and at the same time implying she does not really qualify to be a manager anywhere out of Alaska.

Similarly, we observe mechanisms through which women are not encouraged to compete for challenging tasks because their supervisors fear they might not want them, get them and that they would be emotionally crushed by the rejection. Many remember that when considering a promotion, transfer to another department or a pay raise, they faced friendly and casual reminders and suggestions, discouraging them about their future prospects.

Karla Rojas, when she showed interest in the managerial program and wanted to enroll in managerial training program, was told that she would not be interested and she would not find the program useful. Despite her persistent interest in enrolling in the training program, she was told the program would not be helpful to her and would not improve her.

Cleo Page, a 34-year-old woman from Tulsa, Oklahoma observed in the Livermore branch where she was working, that women mostly worked as cashiers and in departments that included clothes and lingerie, while men staffed the automotive, meat and produce departments. In 1999, when she encountered an opening as the manager of the sporting goods department, she was not directly turned down but before she could apply she was told they “needed a man in the job” and therefore the job was not suitable for a woman.
The most salient method of rejection is an indirect one, where the employee is not directly turned down or confronted, but offered indirect, often irrelevant reasons. Edith Arena, despite her above average rating on her initial 90-day evaluation and a $0.40 raise, was told that she was not given a higher rating, which would have led to a larger pay increase, because “payroll cannot handle it”. Such an excuse appears confusing for employees and while discouraging them also keeps them in those positions.

These mechanisms through which promotions and pay raise takes place in Wal-Mart, also reinforce the often indirect discouraging mechanisms. Wal-Mart promoted from within and lacked a centralized, standard method of promotion. Until January, 2003, no job openings were posted on a central staff bulletin board. The general practice was not to use formal mechanisms in advertising the job, but use more informal methods. As Sandra Stevenson, from Gurnee, Illinois declares, like many others, “During my employment at Sam’s, open positions were not posted. . . . open positions were communicated by word of mouth”.

Most of the managers in store were men and it was referred to as the Boy’s Club. Promotion decisions are made informally based on “tap on the shoulder”, and the information on promotions were provided on a “need to know basis” as Kathleen Schmedia states. When she inquired about promotions in 1998, at the Ohio branch where she had been an employer for some time, she was told that promotion and training information is in a need to know basis and she did not need to know. The non-existence of openly posted positions avoids direct confrontation with many employees.

When women wanted to be considered for the same promotions, they were often not informed about these openings until they were. As Detrx Young remembers:

Sometime in 1998, I wrote on my evaluation that I would like to be promoted to Support Manager. I had overheard someone say that the position would be open, so I put it on the evaluation to show my interest. . . . By that time, I had been with the company for seven years and had worked in nearly every department. I was very familiar with the store and the procedures, and I was willing to work at any time, any hour. I really wanted to move up with this company. Despite talking to my Assistant Manager and putting my name on the list, I was never even interviewed. Instead, they promoted a male named John Cooper who had less seniority, less experience, and had not put his name on the list in the break room. John Cooper was promoted by the Store Manager, Mr. Glen Flory, with whom he was friendly.

The boys’ club, on the other hand, was naturalized and justified based on the distinctions between men and women. It was explained to Anna Dobbs that because she did not hunt, fish, or do other typically-male activities, that she probably would not advance any further.

Means of discouraging women from applying for better positions are not limited to the attitudes and comments of superiors, but are also complemented by daily conversations and jokes by peers as well. Like Collinson (1989) argues, casual, seemingly friendly jokes at the shop floor may create uncomfortable for women and show masculinist assumptions. Many times, this hegemonic masculinist culture is created by informal conversations in which women may be joked about, or even individual women singled out for specific joking: all done in the name of harmless fun. Many women report being referred to as little Janies and girls. Gina Espinoza-Price, remembers that she was introduced as Gina, “the little Mexican princess”, in the workplace. Edith Arena, similarly, recalls that her supervisor “walked the floor constantly and during our daily store meetings, he routinely stated, ‘if the inventory goes badly, we’re going to blame Edith’”. Although his remarks sounded comical and said jokingly accompanied by laughter, she felt threatened.
Similarly, Tamara Zombrun, female employee at the Wal-Mart Store in Mountain Home, Idaho, like her female co-workers, was referred to as babe, baby-doll, or baby by her co-manager. In contrast, he addressed male employees by their first names.

Furthermore, in friendly, casual conversations, women were often told to doll up in order to get promoted. This can also be seen in the way traditional stereotypes of femininity were enforced. Women learned quickly the consequences for appearing too decisive, competent or aggressive: they were cast as bitches. One female employee in Texas was told that women need to be bitches to survive in the work environment; others were criticized if they appeared to act that way. One Idaho woman received a coaching for profanity when she used the word damn in the employee break room. However, she remembers hearing Tony Whitten call a female employee, Bobby Dimick a bitch and he did not receive a coaching, thus contributing to the normalization of the stereotype.

The constant use of stereotypes led inevitably to grouping all women together based on their gender. This refers to stereotypic assumptions, so that each individual woman is perceived only as a member of the category woman, and not as an individual. Men were considered the real employees and are seen as career oriented, but women were seen as support. Being seen only as a member of a group, and not as an individual, is the classic definition of tokenism, according to Kanter (1977).

This leads to the development of a second shift in the workplace itself. Whereas Hochschild (1989) and others had initially understood the second shift to refer to the two types of work – paid work and family work – that working women do, there is a second shift in the workplace as well. Women are expected to do far more emotion work, far more emotional and social cleaning up, and often far more actual cleaning up, than men are. Sue Brown, a former employee from Kentucky remembers:

In July 2000, I asked my new department manager, Janet Chandley, why I have these additional responsibilities, and she told me that the boys’ main job is “to service the customers.” I believe that is my main job as well, but only Barbara Bartley and I, the only female sales associates in the electronics department, have these additional tasks, even though we have both worked there longer than any of the young boys.

Women were expected to serve the customers as well as having additional tasks and help the men in the same department, but they were told nicely that their emotional work is needed and valuable hence the organization would not survive without them.

This second workplace shift also parallels the company’s assumption of men’s work as a part of their career and women's work as supplementing family income. Ramona Scott from Florida applied for a raise, she was told: “Men are here to make a career and women are not. Retail is for housewives who just need to earn extra money”. She was kindly asked to be understanding of men who need to look after their families.

Along with the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, there were assumptions made about men and women’s relative physical abilities. Paula Bird, a former employee from Sedalia, Missouri observed that: “I was not allowed to unload off of trucks, only off of the conveyer belt. My supervisors, including male unit lead Jesse Spencer, rarely allowed women to unload off of the trucks. In my experience, it was much more physically strenuous for workers to unload off of a moving conveyer belt because it required much more rapid and coordinated movement”. Similarly, Rita Coones, who at the time was working as a stocker observed that men were allowed to operate the forklift while female associates were not.
Shirley Ervine, too, had a similar experience with the forklift. Throughout the time I ran the garden center, Store Manager Sigala continued to deny me training on, and use of, the forklift. As a result, I was forced to find a male associate to unload the pallets of soil, bark, and statuary from the delivery trucks whenever the delivery trucks did not provide that service. During the seven years I was employed at the Paso Robles store, I only observed one female associate operate the forklift and she was the Overnight Assistant Manager.

This was done to ease the burden of women and help them. However, such perceived inferiority of women that are naturalized throughout the work life emerges as rules and criteria for pay and promotions. A female manager in Arizona was told she “doesn’t have the right equipment” for promotion to a managerial position. In other words, the fact that she is not a man automatically disqualifies her for many managerial positions. As a female personnel manager in Florida was told, she was “not tough enough for retail”.

Categorizing men and women into homogenous categories also brings with it the assumption of knowing their unified choices. Deciding what is good and beneficial for women, based on such gendered stereotypes, instead of asking them what they would prefer is observed at Wal-Mart. When she applied for the position of domestics department manager, Denise Mott was told by the co-manager that, “You don’t want that job – you don’t want to lift furniture – that’s a man’s job”. Women report being rejected from sports goods departments and meat departments as these sections are defined as traditional activities for men. For example, Danette Brown-Ballou’s manager responded her inquiry with the statement “What do you know about sporting goods?” The assumption that women would not be interested in those departments necessarily implies that men would be more interested in sports goods and meat, which also may disadvantage gender non-conforming men.

Sex segregation is also gender discrimination because the two spheres are never equivalent. As Patricia Bebee, a former Missouri employee observes, these typically women’s departments often involved more work and problems and seldom lead to managerial positions. Bebee argues:

The Cosmetics Department was a high shrink area: high volume with lots of theft. It was also a department comprised exclusively of female associates and I did not view it as a stepping stone to management as I did some of the other departments, such as Electronics and Paper Goods and Chemicals, that were run mostly by male associates and male department managers.

Many acts at Wal-Mart, according to the women, appear to be solicitous and helpful, but undermine women’s equality. These acts were mostly sets of practices in which women are given a wide variety of tasks, especially all the detail work on a project, but a male team leader is credited with the work. Often this comes in the guise of helping her learn the job. Like many other women, Patricia Bebee started at the bottom to learn the job and often did overtime, but, was told that by a store manager that she was too valuable to be promoted when she first expressed interest in a higher position. Similarly, Lori Pidich was transferred to the electronics department in 1995 after years of experience in the store and she assumed the responsibilities of department manager, but was not given the title. Despite her above standard ratings, she was not promoted, even though she was performing the duties of a manager.

Similarly, Paula Bird started as a stocker every time she moved, and had to prove herself over and over to learn the job, but was never promoted. Their managers,
however, took credit for their arduous work. Managers, too, faced a similar situation in which they did the bulk of the work, while men were praised and were given credit for it. Not only were women asked to train men, but also many women employees were asked to do the work for their male counterparts, when men took the credit for the work. Carolyn Perkins regularly exceeded her quota in catching shoplifters in the North Carolina store where she had been working for some time. During the months when her apprehensions exceeded the required quota, she was not praised as a result. Instead, in the monthly branch report, some of these apprehensions were given to the male employees who performed below the required quota for the month.

Most women employees at Wal-Mart, in fact remember a second shift, during which they had to perform the duties of their male colleagues in addition to their own. In 1995, Lorrie Williams, the front end manager was told to work with Mr. Beck, who had no experience with hiring, scheduling, staff management, or working with cash registers, yet he was supposed to be her direct supervisor and supervisor over the entire front end. Yet, she had to train him. Eventually, she ended up completing his responsibilities because he was unable to do them. She completed all the hiring, pay raises, scheduling, associate evaluations, customer service and other management tasks. As she states: “Undertaking both sets of responsibilities was exhausting and extremely frustrating for me and I felt I was not receiving any management support for my efforts”.

Many organizational practices that appeared to build teamwork or informal networking, but, in fact, subtly undermine women, as, in, for example, thoughtlessly scheduling early breakfast meetings, at times when women are likely to have family responsibilities. For both women and men who have spouses and children, the meaning of family changes based on the perception of the company. For men, their families are seen as an advantage in pay and promotions and are often used to justify higher pay and promotions. As Andrea Tallent of North Carolina explained, her store manager argued that men need to be paid more, as they have families to support is interpreted as a factor justifying their higher pay and promotions, while women are told that the fact that they have families to support is an obstacle for promotions.

Similarly, Ramona Scott, from Florida, was informed around 1995-1996, by the male assistant manager for electronics, that the reason why he was giving one of his male employees a merit raise was not because he thought the employee earned it but because “He has a family to support”. Ramona Scott pointed out that she too had a family to support – she was a single mother – but he just walked away.

Having a family may be an obstacle for women. When Stephanie Odle told her boss, Mr. Goodwin she was having a baby and would need to support her daughter, Goodwin required her to provide him with a personal household budget so he could decide whether or not equal pay was warranted.

This also refers to the timing of the work. As Penny Elkins from Río Rancho, New Mexico stated:

I asked Mr. Gray, the Store Manager, and Peter Abbott, the District Manager, numerous times to be transferred from Night Receiving, but they significantly delayed my return to a day schedule because they were accommodating a male Assistant Manager’s desire to spend time with his children in the evenings. Even though I complained to Mr. Gray and Mr. Abbott that I was raising four children at the time and wanted to spend time with them in the evenings, Wal-Mart unfairly prolonged the duration of my Night Receiving assignment.

Micki Earwood was told by her superior Mr. Phelps that employees who work nights and weekends “can’t have kids”. And, while working at Wal-Mart’s Home Office in
Bentonville, Arkansas, Julie Donovan was told by a senior vice president and general merchandise manager that he was surprised that a woman was in such a high position at Wal-Mart, and that he thought she would be better off at home, raising a family.

The undermining of women is not limited to the work hours, but extends to after work hours as well and can be seen in those informal practices by which the workplace dynamics extend to arenas beyond the workplace, and create potentially anomic situations for the women. For example, in the guise of appearing liberated, a male employee invites a female employee for a drink after work, but then shifts into a dating model and refuses to allow her to pay for a round. It can fuse with the choices workers make about where and when to hold off-site gatherings and parties, and especially the use of pornography or commercial sex services.

Women employees remember parties, dinners or business meetings were held at places like Hooters or strip clubs and women were invited and required to go to be inclusive. If the women did not like it, they were considered prudes or bitches, since obviously, in today's society, everyone should like these places. Of course, these expectations not only create discomfort in the women's work environment, but also create gendered expectations of what men and women should enjoy. Such activities also assume that all men enjoy such places.

Discussion
What is common in these work experiences is, interestingly the ongoing nature of sex discrimination. In almost every case, before women were not promoted or given raises, they have experienced everyday signs. What many employees found surprising is that these everyday acts were packaged nicely. These daily, everyday mechanisms of sex discrimination that are similar to the daily mechanisms identified by Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) as the main mechanisms of sex discrimination. They emphasize the covert, unintentional and subtle ways in which sex discrimination takes place in the everyday lives of women. Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) enumerate nine mechanisms condescending chivalry, supportive discouragement, friendly harassment, subjective objectification, radiant devaluation, liberated sexism, benevolent exploitation, considerate domination, collegial exclusion. Based on masculinist assumptions of the organization, the everyday experience of the women at Wal-Mart appear to be similar to the theoretical model of subtle discrimination. However, as observed in the work stories of women, these categories are not separate from each other, but often overlapping. What we observe are not those clearly marked categories, but simple everyday comments and acts that appear subtle and often in guise of protecting and helping women. Borrowing from Connell (1987), the hegemonic masculinist assumptions that suppress women appear packages as nice, helpful and protective.

Conclusion
This paper offers an alternative view on the sex discrimination case against Wal-Mart. Instead of focusing on the structures of, or the outcomes and consequences of sex discrimination, this paper focuses on the formal and informal processes through and by which sex discrimination takes place and becomes normalized as simply everyday workplace behavior. It thus makes sex discrimination far more subtle and insidious, and exceptionally difficult to see, let alone to get others to see.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the outcome, a detailed understanding of the process and the mechanisms through which sex discrimination took place is needed. The experience of sex discrimination from the perspective of women requires
an understanding of the actual work experience, rules, regulations and dominant categories used for men and women and hiring and promotion mechanisms. Such a task can be accomplished mainly by the use of detailed statements of women describing in detail their actual experience.

While extensive literature points to the need for such analyses, in the case of actual large scale sex discrimination cases (i.e., the Sears case), are often characterized by the marked absence of large scale in-depth qualitative data, outlining the process and experience of sex discrimination. This analysis on Wal-Mart provides the opportunity to offer empirical evidence for understanding the lived experience of discrimination.

Our findings show, based on an in-depth analysis of this large scale, detailed collection of interviews, that women experience sex discrimination, not through rigid mechanisms, but as a continuation of normalized, everyday events that were experiences in the form of friendly exchanges and paternal, protectionist behavior on the part of the employer and colleagues. The subtlety and the niceness of the exchanges, while reinforcing gender stereotypes and assumptions and resulting in sex discrimination, often results in perpetuating the work experience and explains why women stay in these jobs for as long as they do. That is why many women who were interviewed have stayed and worked under such circumstances for almost decades. This paper offers a deeper understanding of the way sex discrimination works. The next step would be to unravel the men's perceptions and experience of the sex discrimination case.

References


Lived experience of sex discrimination


Further reading


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