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INEQUALITY IS ALIVE AND WELL IN U.S. WORKPLACES

Alleged discrimination at Wal-Mart and Kodak is reflective of patterns throughout American workplaces, according to new research published in the American Sociological Review.

This June, a federal judge gave lawyers the green light to file the largest civil rights class-action suit ever, as 1.6 million women charged Wal-Mart with sexual discrimination in its employment practices, including blocking their rightful access to promotions. A month later black workers filed a similar suit against Eastman Kodak, claiming that the world's leading maker of photographic film discriminated against them with respect to pay and access to authority.

Consider this: Black men with the same skills as white men are only half as likely to rise from supervisor to manager. For black women, the chances are less than a third. New research explains.

These events underscore the fact that inequality is alive and well in American workplaces. It also illustrates how battle lines in this struggle have shifted over recent years. No longer is the central issue in the struggle for equality simply about who is hired and who is not. Within an increasingly diverse workforce, it is about who is promoted and given the keys to organizational power and attendant raises, and who is not.

What’s the evidence?
Legal scholars speculate that, while the Wal-Mart and Kodak cases will include personal accounts from the front lines, they will eventually boil down to statistics. This raises the question of what kind of evidence constitutes proof of blocked opportunity. In the current issue of the American Sociological Review, James Elliott and Ryan Smith offer an answer.

Using survey data from workers in cities across the country, these sociologists examined the extent and causes of inequality in promotions and access to organizational authority. Based on 2-hour face-to-face interviews with 3480 men and women, they find the employment situations of white and minority men and women in a wide array of workplaces, not just Fortune 500 companies. They learned that race and gender are not separate sources of discrimination. Instead, they compound each other in limiting access to power and promotion. Using these steps, Elliott and Smith drew a representative picture of these inequalities. Their evidence places recent discrimination lawsuits in national perspective.

The Higher You Go, the Harder It Gets . . . For Some
In 1986, the Wall Street Journal coined the phrase "glass ceiling" to describe the invisible barriers that impeded women from advancing to senior leadership positions within organizations. Since then, the metaphor has become shorthand for the idea that race and gender inequalities get worse at higher levels in the company. To examine this issue nationally, Elliott and Smith divided workers into three
categories, each with more organizational power (and average pay) than the last: laborers with no power; supervisors with the power only to supervise; and managers with the power to hire, fire and set pay. Although broad, these categories help us to see the big picture.

In their study, they estimated the chances of promotion from one category to the next for workers of different races and genders. They found that, with the exception ofLatinas, nearly all groups experience the same chances of promotion from laborer to supervisor, that is, low-level promotion. However, white men enjoy much greater chances of promotion from supervisor to manager, that is, high-level promotion. For example, Elliott and Smith found that even after statistically controlling for education, experience, and organizational tenure, the chances of black men being promoted from supervisor to manager were only half those of white men. For black women, their chances of promotion were less than a third of those for similar white men.

What accounts for these disparities? Beyond differences in skills and experience, Elliott and Smith examined organizations and job networking. They found that superiors are much more likely to fill positions of power with subordinates of the same race and sex as themselves. Moreover, this tendency toward in-group favoritism is stronger in filling higher-level managerial positions than in filling lower-level supervisory positions.

The result is a proverbial double-edged sword. While “in-group favoritism” implies that the promotion of women and minorities may open doors to similar others in the future, white men still oversee the vast majority of managerial positions in the United States, allowing them to benefit most from this general tendency toward in-group favoritism.

The Unexpected Beneficiaries of Networking

With respect to networking, Elliott and Smith find that self reports of such activity cannot explain white men's ongoing advantage in organizational hierarchies. This is because white men at all levels use networks to get jobs, so this factor cannot explain why they are uniquely advantaged in higher-level promotions—a constant cannot explain a variable outcome. Instead, and somewhat surprisingly, they find that black women rely most heavily on network assistance to gain higher-level promotions. The implication is that job networking can serve as an important response, as well as cause, of discrimination. It might also be that less advantaged workers tend to be more aware of network assistance when they receive it, making their responses to such inquiries more reliable.

Summary

Elliott and Smith explain, “Racial and gender inequality in U.S. workplaces is not limited to Wal-Mart and Kodak—although the political clout and sizeable workforces of these corporations make for good headlines and strong cases.” As we follow their respective suits, Elliott and Smith push us to understand that the legal problems of these organizations are, in fact, public issues that affect us all. “After all,” continue Elliott and Smith, “sex and race discrimination are barriers not only to individual workers but
also to social and economic progress because it limits our creative capacity and democratic dreams. And, these are limits we should not accept.”

Brief based on:

CONTACT: James Elliott, Ph.D., Sociology Department, Tulane University, 220 Newcomb Hall, New Orleans, LA 70118, Tel: 504-862-3010, Email: ire@tulane.edu. Or, Ryan A. Smith, Ph.D., School of Public Affairs, Baruch College, City University of New York, Box D0901, New York, New York, 10010, Tel: 212-802-2856, Email: rasassoc01@aol.com.

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