**Impediments to progress towards discrimination-free workplaces: The overlooked causes of gender-based discrimination in the Pakistan and UK contexts**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose**: Gender-based discrimination (GBD) in the workplace is a worldwide phenomenon. Both developed and developing states face this issue at different levels and magnitudes, though in the latter, it is more prevalent. We explore the overlooked possible root causes of workplace GBD.

**Design, Methodology and Approach**: Employing qualitative methods, data were collected via semi-structured interviews, from 40 women employed in the service sector in Pakistan and the United Kingdom. Data underwent thematic analysis by applying the Gioia method.

**Findings**: Using ambivalent sexism theory to underpin our approach, we conclude that educational institutes, especially single-gender ones, could be among the primary reasons for GBD in Pakistani workplaces, but not those in the United Kingdom, where it is less prominent. We identify common factors that challenge this theory and point out current social, industrial, and economic situations that link with such single-gender education.

**Practical Implication**: This study can help ‘institutionalize’ (establish policy and practice as organizational culture) a discrimination-free workplace and assist relevant stakeholders by facilitating policymakers and government agencies to more deeply understand causality and take corrective and preventative action against GBD.

**Originality and Value**: The findings contribute to the studies of gender discrimination and educational provision, by elucidating previously overlooked possible roots of persistent GBD.

**Keywords:** Gender-based discrimination, ambivalent sexism, single-gender education, women in the service sector.

**Introduction**

Workplace discrimination is a persistent challenge, raising concerns about workplace relations and economic fairness (Bates et al., 2021). Women and ethnic minorities are two of the most affected groups (Lup et al., 2018). Gender-based discrimination (GBD) includes unfair treatment based on gender, occurring in various social contexts, such as employment, education, and health (McKinley et al., 2019; Opara et al., 2020). Since the 1970s, GBD has been a major focus of organizational and management research (Mama, 2020). Research shows that gender diversity can enhance organizational performance (Ali and Konrad, 2017: Harel et al. 2003). Even as graduate school attracts a more diverse pool of students (Baruch et al., 2016), women are under-represented and concentrated at lower levels of management (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004; Heilman and Caleo, 2018). Although women are in a better position compared to men at the junior managerial posts in the United Kingdom (UK) and more women enter management, they still lag behind in promotions to managers’ positions (Babafemi, 2023; Powel, 2023).

We analyze the nature and extent of gender discrimination in the service sectors of Pakistan and the UK and uses social and cultural factors as well as legal regulations to identify similarities and differences. Pakistan with relatively more conservative gender attitudes, lower female literacy rate and weaker legal rights provides a classic example of how patriarchal systems prevent women from entering the labor force (Ashraf et al., 2021). On the same note, Mushtaq and de Visser (2023) have indicated that while the UK is a developed OECD country and does not lack legal protection (e.g. the Equality Act 2010), women are still locked out from the upper echelons through skewed pay gaps. These two contexts were selected to determine the extents to which legal and policy regimes respond to workplace discrimination: a developing and a developed country. Comparatively looking at the two set of the policies helps to establish where different policies aimed to enhance gender equality are strong and where they are weak (Khan et al., 2017).

Culture and social expectations that define customary practices also vary with countries such as Mexico and Japan, experience differential gender roles undermining women at the workplace. Knowledge of the impact of organizational and national cultural facets can give some understanding of the link between culture and gender prejudice (Mushtaq and de Visser, 2023).

Examining economic inequalities, salary discrepancies, and access to employment opportunities can further clarify how economic variables sustain workplace discrimination. A comprehensive analysis may help designing effective interventions to advance gender equality globally (Tahir, 2023). Cross-national comparisons of gender dynamics, organizational cultures, and workplace practices can reveal best practices for creating inclusive workplaces (Khan et al., 2017).

Due to its high representation of women employees, the service sector is ideal for studying GBD across hierarchies. Its global presence and public interaction offer researchers greater access to explore the influence of social and cultural factors impact on gender discrimination (Eagly and Karau, 2021).

To develop a suitable theoretical framework in understanding GBD, we build on Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST), which identifies and focuses on the dual nature of sexism. Being driven by either hostile or benevolent sexism, both perspectives emphasize opposite attitudes (Glick and Fiske, 2001; 2018). In Pakistan, single-gender educational institutions perpetuate traditional gender roles, reinforcing both forms of sexism and contributing significantly to GBD (Mian et al., 2016). This influence of single-gender (or gender-segregated) education is a major cause of GBD in Pakistani workplaces, a factor less common in the UK. Conversely, in the UK, where single-gender education is minimal, GBD is driven more by structural inequalities and organizational culture, despite robust legal protections (Bates et al., 2021; Fatimah, 2016). By analyzing the socio-economic and cultural conditions in both contexts, our research highlights the need for comprehensive strategies addressing both ‘hostile’ and ‘benevolent’ sexism to foster discrimination-free workplaces (Agadullina et al., 2022; Bareket and Fiske, 2023). This approach aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding GBD and inform policy-making that would promote gender equality.

We propose that a major cause of GBD in Pakistani workplaces, less common in the UK, is the influence of single-gender educational institutions. We examine the social, industrial, and economic conditions potentially linked to such segregation, in line with our theoretical framework. To address our research aims, we developed the following research questions:

First, under what circumstances and to what extent do women in Pakistan and the UK experience GBD in the workplace?

Second, what are the impediments to achieving discrimination-free workplaces in Pakistan and the UK?

Third, what are the possible overlooked root causes of workplace GBD in Pakistan and the UK?

By shedding light on workplace discrimination against women, particularly in developing nations like Pakistan, where it is exacerbated by lax legislation and enforcement (Abro, 2022; Iqbal, 2015), we identify and analyze possible root causes of GBD and support efforts to reduce educationally derived prejudice and promote gender equality in the workplace (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2021; Agut et al., 2023). The study underscores the necessity of concerted international efforts to promote gender equality, drawing attention to the high severity of the problem in Pakistan compared with Western societies due to their less comprehensive laws and implementation (Borchorst and Simi, 2018). By contributing to the literature on the acceptance of women as equal professionals, we highlight the importance of addressing and mitigating GBD globally.

**Underpinning Theory and Literature Review**

***Overview of Workplace Gender-based Discrimination in the Service Sector***

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines discrimination as unequal treatment based on factors like gender (ILO, 2016). Women often report experiencing this issue in the service industry, which employs many female workers (Iqbal, 2015). This gender-based discrimination (GBD) manifests variously, impacting everything, from recruitment (Goldin and Rouse, 2000; Gregory, 2003), gender stereotypes (Gorman, 2005), pay equity (Baruch et al., 2022; Gregory, 2003; Opara et al., 2020), promotions (Gauci et al., 2022), and career advancement (Shafiq, 2014; Hershcovis et al., 2020). Cultural expectations within the service industry can create a breeding ground for GBD, often leading to unequal opportunity, ‘glass ceilings’, ‘glass cliffs’, limited or malapportioned rewards, and even sexual harassment (Bader et al., 2018; Bhatti and Ali, 2022; Boyer, 2022; Bruckmüller and Branscombe, 2010; Cooper et al., 2021; Masood et al., 2021; Triana et al., 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020; Yanget al., 2022).

Worldwide, GBD is pervasive (Shaukat et al., 2016; Yue and King, 2021). In Pakistan, women comprise only 22% of the overall labor force, compared to 48% globally. Moreover, Pakistan is ranked the third worst in the Global Gender Gap Index (ILO, 2022; Mani et al., 2020). Pakistan signed both ILO Conventions 100 and 111 and applied different initiatives to align with the associated principles. However, the relative legal ‘anarchy’ (Iqbal, 2015) and misperceptions arising from religiosity, cultural norms, and a patriarchal mindset (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021) still exist.

The situation in the UK is in stark contrast in detail but not dissimilar overall. Even after accounting for inequality, there is still a pay disparity, which typically widens with age and earnings percentile (Apergis and Lynch 2022; Baruch et al., 2022). In top management, women continue to be underrepresented and excluded from decision-making (Borchorst and Siim, 2018).

Understanding the root causes of GBD in the service sector is crucial to achieving workplace equality. By examining these factors, policymakers and organizations can develop targeted interventions to dismantle systemic barriers and promote gender equity (Cornwall, 2016). Our research investigates public and private service organizations to identify the root causes of gender bias and its impact on women’s careers, following Powell (2023).

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***Theories of Gender Discrimination in the Workplace***

We draw on ambivalent sexism theory (AST) to illustrate how both hostile and benevolent sexism perpetuate GBD in workplaces. While benevolent sexism contains outwardly pleasant but condescending views that uphold the traditional gender norms, hostile sexism encompasses overtly harmful attitudes and behaviors toward women. GBD is pervasive in Pakistani workplaces as a result of single-gender educational institutions that instill these sexist views in pupils from a young age. In the UK, benign sexism quietly endures in corporate environments despite more robust legislative protections (Yumas, 2024). Our study highlights the need for comprehensive strategies for addressing both forms of sexism, to achieve discrimination-free workplaces in both contexts (Agadullina et al., 2022; Bareket and Fiske, 2023; Connor et al., 2017).

Moreover, GBD is also explained through asocial role theory lens; this posits that gendered behaviors and attitudes stem from societal role expectations. When men and women perform different social roles, their behaviors and attitudes diverge; conversely, similar roles result in similar behaviors (Eagly, 1987). Additionally, tokenism theory (Kanter, 1977) explains how women, as a minority in male-dominated workplaces, face heightened visibility and pressure to conform to stereotypes, exacerbating GBD.

GBD persists in organizational behaviors, procedures, and structures (Russen et al., 2021). It exists in socio-political, economic, and cultural spheres globally (Mohajan, 2022). Even in the West, despite significant progress, GBD remains a challenge (Biswas et al., 2022). Key impediments include cultural norms (Chaudhuri, 2021), lack of awareness and education among women (Lombardo and Bustelo, 2022; Yang et al., 2022), social customs, and patriarchal mind-sets (Borchorst and Siim, 2018).

In Pakistan, rapid social, political, and economic developments over the past two decades have weakened state protections for women, increasing workplace GBD (Mani et al., 2020; Chaudhuri, 2021). Institutions like the family, state, and religion, rooted in cultural norms, contribute to gender disparities (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021). Additional factors worsening workplace GBD include gaps between policy and practice, leadership issues, organizational culture, HR policies, lesser egalitarianism, stereotyping, and social behaviors (Fritz and van Knippenberg, 2020; Raver and Nishii, 2010; Hershcovis et al., 2020).

Exploring and identifying varying circumstances and the extent of workplace GBD, we focus on two countries—Pakistan and the UK. GBD as a phenomenon persists, and as a result, we seek to identify missing root causes, therein contributing to GBD theory in that context. In this study we explored, applied, and challenged AST.

***Consequences of Gender Discrimination in the Workplace***

As discussed above, GBD is prevalent globally, especially in the service sector (Siegmann and Majid, 2021; Fatimah, 2016), but in developing countries like Pakistan the situation is barely appreciated (Mian et al., 2016). GBD can lead to numerous adverse outcomes (Hershcovis et al., 2020), such as reduced productivity (Mian et al., 2016), high employee turnover due to toxicity (Nuseir et al., 2021), and strained personal relationships (Hashmi et al., 2013). Other repercussions may include damage to reputation, compromised health (Lewis, 2018), decreased innovation, financial losses (Triana et al., 2019), burnout (Heilman and Caleo, 2018), and an atmosphere of injustice which perpetuates further uncertainty and unfairness (Shaukat et al., 2016). Nationally, workplace GBD has significant negative impact on the economy and society, posing challenges to progress and development for all stakeholders (Lewis, 2018). Creating a welcoming and safe work environment where staff feel valued can mitigate these impacts (Liff and Wajcman, 1996). Ensuring equal opportunity, equal compensation, and the acceptance of diversity under the notion of workplace equality is essential (Imam et al., 2013). Employees often leave because they feel underappreciated, which can lead to poor performance (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). This weakens both individual businesses and the nation as a whole. In essence, ignoring or undervaluing half of the talent pool would lead to detrimental outcomes (Baruch et al., 2022).

The above discussion brings us to the research model depicted in Figure 1, and our three research questions:

1. Under what circumstances and to what extent do women in Pakistan and the UK experience GBD in the workplace?
2. What are the impediments to progress toward discrimination-free workplaces in Pakistan and the UK?
3. What are the root causes of GBD in the workplace in Pakistan and the UK that are overlooked?

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

***Rationale for a Pakistan-UK Comparison in Researching Workplace GBD***

These two contexts were selected for the study because they encourage evaluation of how well laws, rules, and enforcement strategies handle the issue by contrasting distinct cultural, legal, and policy frameworks. Comparing and contrasting these should highlight the advantages, disadvantages, and areas where policy interventions need to be strengthened (Ashraf et al., 2021). When it comes to gender roles and equality, Pakistan and the UK have different cultural norms, attitudes, and societal expectations. Investigating these elements can yield valuable insights into how cultural context influences workplace dynamics, which could be applicable in other settings (Mushtaq and de Visser, 2023).

These insights can inform strategies that enhance commitment to inclusive practices and promote egalitarian organizational cultures across various contexts. Further, the research can clarify how economic variables interact with gender to sustain discrimination in the workplace, by examining economic inequality, salary discrepancies, and access to employment, across Pakistan and the UK. Designing successful interventions to advance gender equality in the workplace requires a thorough understanding of the economic environment (Tahir, 2023). From people management perspective, it is essential to assess not only the legal frameworks but also how organizational practices align with these laws, as this alignment plays a significant role in shaping workplace equity. Additionally, studying gender dynamics, organizational culture, and workplace practices across Pakistan and the UK provides a comparative analysis into how context either exacerbate or lessen gender discrimination. Ultimately, our research aims to bridge the gap between legislation and practice emphasizing that robust equality laws must be complemented by proactive organizational strategies to create meaningful changes.

**Methodology and Data Analysis**

To answer our research questions we employed qualitative methodology. A constructivist ontology and epistemology guided by the interpretive paradigm formed the foundation of this approach (Otoo, 2020). Conversations between researchers and participants were the source of our data, allowing us to access the mental constructions that people attach to events. A qualitative approach like this has shown to be appropriate for this goal (Cuthbertson et al., 2020).

The sample comprised 40 women employees of public and private service sector organizations in Pakistan and the UK, 25 from Pakistan and 15 from the UK. This sample size exceeds Saunders and Townsend (2016) recommendation for sample size in qualitative research. Data were collected following a purposive sampling technique (Lobo, 2023), whereby participants the necessary criteria. Participants received no incentives. Details of the participants are presented in Appendix 1. Most of the UK participants were White British, with a few identifying as Arab, Pakistani, and Indian. In Pakistan, all participants were Pakistani natives and represented various provinces: from Punjab, Sindh, Islamabad, Baluchistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Following the interpretive paradigm, we used semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with standardized questions in English with a predetermined framework that set the precise language and sequence of the questions (Henriksen et al., 2022), as per the guidelines of Westby et al. (2003). The interviews were conducted either in person or online, depending on participant availability, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes each. The interview protocol is presented in Appendix 2.

The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring semantic themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Data were sorted into different codes, themes, and aggregate dimensions (Braun and Clarke, 2006), using Gioia’s methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). We used ongoing comparison to identify data saturation; when fresh themes failed to materialize, we ceased gathering new data (Guest et al., 2006). To further investigate any emerging themes, follow-up interviews and further data collection and coding were carried out concurrently.

More specifically, the data analysis began by reading and rereading the interview transcripts and grouping individual descriptions of participants’ responses using open coding, which represented a slightly higher level of abstraction than the data itself, to ensure the preservation of data richness. To verify external validity of the analysis and its interpretation, we first coded the transcripts line by line before repeating the procedure for the data sample. Transcripts were then labelled with the codes, followed by the construction of first-order concepts with content that was as near to the original data as possible. Subsequently, we developed second-order themes, indicating theory-based terms. Finally, aggregated dimensions were identified by combining these second-order themes. The data structure was thus built on the foundations of first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregated dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). We coded all transcripts individually for mention of the circumstances and instances of GBD, impediments to the eradication of GBD, and any overlooked root causes of GBD in the workplace (see Appendices 3 and 4 for the data structure).

**Findings**

Our findings reveal the circumstances and instances of workplace GBD that our participants encountered at differing levels of severity, the impediments to its eradication, good practice and policy formation, and legislation, along with overlooked root causes reported, which can be tackled to address workplace GBD.

***Circumstances and Instances of GBD in the Workplace in Pakistan and the UK***

As depicted in Figure 2a, our sample indicates that GBD exists in the typical Pakistani workplace in the following forms and concern. Participants noted that many Pakistani women face stereotypical perceptions of being *bibi*—a colloquial derogatory term for women implying less intelligence and reliability (Gorman, 2005). They reported frequent discouragement and inequality in resource allocation. Furthermore, according to the participants, women are considered not serious, emotionally weaker, less decisive, gossipy, and less dependable, professional, or competent. A lecturer in a Pakistani government college commented:

*“Usually, it is decided by the male colleagues that this task should be given to a male employee; because she is bibi, it will be difficult for her”.*

An admin officer from Pakistan’s land record office expressed the following:

*“There is no reason needed to discriminate against women other than their being women. People think that they cannot work properly because she is a woman, which means it is an extremely stereotypical situation in which women are only judged by being women without people knowing about their abilities”.*

An instructor from Pakistan’s vocational training institute explained:

*“I feel so many things, i.e. the male boss does not allocate me the late [part-time] task normally associated with male employees. They think women cannot have such financial responsibilities so part-time work is the right of men”.*

A junior colleague admin officer added that:

*“Women are treated as less dependable employees who cannot keep any secrets so are excluded from confidential matters.”*

In the case of our UK sample, the respondents reported that workplace GBD exists in the following forms and concerns: Women face stereotyping, pay gap inequity, exclusion in allocating responsibility and resources, and bullying. Furthermore, they are considered to be less competent and to gossip. A property manager from the UK said:

*“Stereotypes [are] that women tend to do all the caring work and that they are supposed to clean up after the men and things like that.”*

Three UK university administrators provided the following insightful responses:

*“When it comes to allocating resources or nominating staff or something, women face it implicitly”, “usually employers prefer men; they think if we hire a female, she will go on maternity leave”,* and *“it is perceived that men retain better information and women love to gossip”.*

Clearly, GBD manifests somewhat differently in Pakistan and the UK. Entrenched cultural norms in Pakistan perpetuate unfavorable views of women’s inherent capacity and roles, discouraging them and creating resource inequity. These views take the form of embedded prejudices and the *bibi* stereotype. Conversely, the UK’s participants reported grappling with issues like bullying, unequal workload distribution, and salary disparity, often stemming from systemic inequalities and unconscious bias. Stereotypes, though present, are rooted in traditional expectations and are less widespread.

As mentioned, AST sheds light on these disparities. It emphasizes how societal expectations limit women’s potential, as reflected in Pakistan’s resource inequity and negative perceptions that align with the AST concept of hostile sexism. The UK’s pay gap and resource distribution imbalance exemplify the AST concept of benign sexism, where seemingly positive views effectively sustain gender inequality. Notably, both situations highlight preconceptions, supporting AST’s core tenet: sexism can be subtle and ingrained in societal norms (Agut et al., 2023).

***Impediments to GBD in Pakistan and the UK***

The impediments to GBD in the Pakistani workplace are shown in Figure 2a. Within our sample from Pakistan, women’s lesser willingness to disclose their GBD experiences is the biggest obstacle to tackling the issue. Because they were embarrassed to acknowledge it directly, women tended to reply more indirectly. Further, organizational practices are reported to be inadequate, in line with Ali and Konrad (2017). When asked what policies or measures are provided by their organization, women tended to skip answering by saying “I don’t know” and moving to the next question, in which recommendations were sought on what organizations should do to eradicate GBD. Women tended to prefer remaining silent and not seek the use of legal or organizational platforms for justice. This may have been due to the risk of victim blaming, reputational damage, a lack of confidence in the system, inadequate laws and their unsatisfactory enforcement, the acceptance of their ‘inferiority’ due to a patriarchal mindset, women’s discrimination against other women, the unsatisfactory implementation of organizational rules and regulations, and paucity in the execution of management roles. A medical doctor working in a Pakistani state hospital expressed the following:

*“Yes, women are probably not confident about the system of justice. There are different types of women, some [of whom] are doing nothing and motivating this culture for the security of their jobs for many years and some women are discriminating against other women.”*

A lecturer from a Pakistani state-funded college reported on her experiences:

*“I have seen prejudice from a normal-ranking co-worker underneath me. I battled for my rights, and one of my female supervisors did not support me; instead, she used to advise me to back off since I would [later] have to deal with the issue because ‘he is a man, you are a female, and his ego is more important than yours’. I begged my female co-workers for assistance, but the boss warned them that they might lose their jobs if they supported me, so they refrained. I deliberated and proudly obtained my right[s]. Nothing is impossible; it all depends on us.”*

The impediments to addressing GBD in the UK are shown in Figure 2b. Our UK respondents are not reluctant to speak about GBD; they were ready to unpack each implicit and explicit instance of discrimination without any hesitation. We concluded that the main obstacles to tackling GBD in UK workplaces are founded in a lack of respect and discrimination. Thus, we hear that they more easily accept compliments such as “you are too beautiful to do this” which can be perceived as undermining their professional capabilities. Additionally, not only men but women also discriminate against other women. Further, women often remain silent because, if they try to report discrimination, they may be held responsible for creating a toxic environment. A senior environmentalist working in an international environmental protection organization in the UK reported the following:

*“Women are promoted slowly and disregarded when paid workload is assigned, and if we speak up, we risk being accused of creating a toxic workplace. Alternatively, we occasionally receive reassuring comments like ‘this position has too much pressure, which is not good for you as a woman’ and ‘it works mostly’.”*

Her colleague, a junior environmentalist, added:

*“If there is a chance to go to a meeting or participate in a conference, a male co-worker will be chosen instead of me. They will explain that it is challenging for you to travel or do challenging fieldwork.”*

Hence, a key difference in impediments to addressing GBD in Pakistan and the UK lies in reporting. Pakistani women are more hesitant to speak out due to fear of victim blaming, reputational damage, and a lack of faith in the system. In contrast, UK women readily report GBD experiences. Yet, UK workplaces face challenges in recognizing subtle discrimination disguised as compliments and in steering a culture where they may be perceived as troublemakers for speaking up. Both countries’ participants see women experiencing discrimination from both genders, not just from men.

Comparing the impediments to tackling GBD in Pakistan and the UK, our findings support AST. In Pakistan, women’s silence from social stigma and a weak system aligns with AST’s concept of hostile sexism, where prejudice discourages reporting. Conversely, UK women readily report, but a culture of more subtle sexism, with compliments masking discrimination and women fearing blame, exemplifies AST’s benevolent sexism, where seemingly positive biases perpetuate inequality. Both contexts highlight AST’s core idea: sexism can be overt, or it can be disguised thus surreptitiously hindering progress.

***Overlooked Root Causes of GBD in Pakistan and the UK***

We found that the overlooked root causes of GBD, expressed by our participants lie outside of the organization (see Figure 3). As suggested by the literature, they include patriarchal mindsets (Connor et al., 2017), society and culture (Mama, 2020; Talat et al., 2020), parents, teachers, and educational institutions (Mian et al., 2016). The root causes were consistently identified by participants across both countries, indicating a pervasive issue that transcends individual organizations. These causes are found to be in common across both countries. The UK only has a limited single-gender education system; nonetheless, we found that an effective education system develops the personality of children so, if GBD in the workplace exists, it can be eradicated by the collective efforts of parents, teachers, and educational institutions by changing the patriarchal mindset through effective education. The single-gender education system in Pakistan worsens the situation and creates a specific mindset in children that may cause imbalanced personality development around embracing gender equality (Kriesi and Imdorf, 2019; Alvarado Martín-Calero, 2020).

Hence, these parallels reveal how GBD differs across a variety of settings. Our analysis suggests that as Pakistan struggles with societal expectations and hierarchies that marginalize women, the UK must confront more nuanced forms of discrimination to be found within the intricacies of relationships between genders. To create truly equal workplaces for all women, these unique difficulties must be addressed using multifaceted, culturally aware approaches.

In terms of AST, those in the UK may struggle with the subtly condescending attitudes of benevolent sexism, whereas Pakistan’s norms to exclude women are frequently the result of hostile sexism. However, both effectively limit the opportunities available to women. It would therefore take diversified strategies to address these challenges in each situation.

Our findings suggest that GBD can be eradicated in both countries with the active participation of multiple stakeholders. Engaging families early is crucial, as they hold significant influence over children’s perspective. If families have a patriarchal mindset or conventional and old-fashioned ideas, this chain should be broken early, in educational institutions, which have the first significant social interactions, within which children may come to understand and assimilate human rights around equality. The bias at the core of all forms of discrimination has frequently been reduced by education systems (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2021).

A participant working as a lecturer at a Pakistani university shared the following:

*“Some people have patriarchal ideas about gender. These people try to infuse or inherit them into their children, and then it is mixed with the education outside and other students. So educational institutions should break this chain.”*

A teacher working in a Pakistani state high school said:

*“Education and parents can play an important role. More attention is needed in making students aware from a young age about their rights and the rights of others.”*

A teaching assistant in a UK university reported:

*“Sometimes it is ignorance and sometimes it is extra favour from others but there is no balance in behaviour for women due to a patriarchal mindset.”*

A resort owner in the UK explained:

*“It is an embedded stereotype which is reinforced by male patriarchy, misogyny, and because women are too afraid of speaking out and have experience of being put down, so it carries on.”*

A lawyer working for a UK based law firm raised the question:

*“Human behaviour is all based on the training and growth of men and women; in the workplace, we have to work together so why not at the time of getting an education?”*

These findings are in line with AST. Benevolent sexism, also known as protective paternalism, involves men treating women as delicate and in need of protection. This attitude was more prevalent in Pakistan than in the UK. Men may prevent women from taking on challenging tasks, believing they are incapable of handling them. Instead, women are often expected to excel in and accordingly steered towards child-rearing and household duties (also known as complementary gender differentiation). Sometimes, men overly admire women simply for being themselves, thereby excluding them from certain roles and responsibilities.

[Insert Figures 2a and 2b about here]

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

**Discussion**

We have studied gender discrimination in Pakistan and the UK, considering socio-cultural, economic, and legal contexts. These countries offer contrasting perspectives on gender dynamics due to their distinct legal systems, work customs, and cultural norms. The comparison highlights shared challenges and unique factors influencing workplace gender discrimination, providing valuable insights for developing policies to promote global gender equality and inclusive work environments (Ashraf et al., 2021; Mushtaq and de Visser, 2023; Tahir, 2023; Khan et al., 2017). This comparison also raises important questions about the effectiveness of existing equality laws in both contexts and the necessity for proactive organizational practices.

We answered our three research questions in the following ways. First is the question over what circumstances and to what extent women in Pakistan and the UK experience GBD in the workplace. We find that Pakistani women face more explicit GBD arising from stereotyping, such as being perceived as gossipers, as worthy of unequal pay, unequal resource allocation, and exclusion, and being seen as more dependent in decision-making, needing discouragement, or as less-serious employees (Yue and King, 2021; Russen et al., 2021; Nuseir et al., 2021; Riquelme et al., 2021). Their British counterparts also experience persistent implicit GBD, manifesting as stereotyping over perceived incompetence, bullying, pay gaps, and inequitable distribution of responsibilities and resources (Newman et al., 2022; Russen et al., 2021). This illustrates how cultural perceptions, alongside the legal frameworks, shape the experiences of women in both countries.

Second, addressing the question raised over identifying the impediments to achieving discrimination-free workplaces in Pakistan and the UK. The main one for Pakistani women is their reluctance to report discrimination due to victim blaming, reputational damage, and a lack of confidence in the legal system (Fatimah, 2016). Organizational interventions are insufficient, and a patriarchal mindset perpetuates discrimination. Women also sometimes discriminate against other women (Gauci et al., 2022) and many women are unaware of organizational policies on GBD, underscoring a need for better awareness and training (Abro, 2022; Zulfiqar, 2022). This highlights the critical role that companies and managers play in fostering awareness and creating safe environments for reporting discrimination. Conversely, British women often face implicit discrimination in areas lacking clear definition or regulation, such as part-time employment and hierarchical duty distribution. Efforts to address systemic biases are vital (Bates et al., 2021). The UK has more advanced legal frameworks, and women are generally aware of their rights and sometime receive training on employment rights. However, even in this context, the commitment of organizations to uphold these rights through effective implementation remains essential. Senior management plays a crucial role in controlling GBD, for example, when organizations implement centralized complaint systems and equality practices (Shah and Baporikar, 2013).

Third, addressing the question raised over identifying the overlooked root causes of GBD in the workplaces across Pakistan and the UK. We learned that Pakistani GBD often stems from external factors, such as patriarchal mindsets, societal and cultural norms, and conventional thinking within educational institutions (Schroth, 2019; Mama, 2020; Talat et al., 2020; Mian et al., 2016). Their educational single-gender exacerbates GBD by preventing familiarity with the opposite or other genders, leading to imbalanced personality development around gender equality (Van Hek et al., 2019; Kriesi and Imdorf, 2019; Alvarado Martín-Calero, 2020). In contrast, educational institutions in the UK rarely practice single-gender, which mitigates this issue. This difference underscores the importance of educational practices in shaping future workplace dynamics.

Our findings support AST and its two perspectives of hostile and benevolent sexism by showcasing its explanatory power across contrasting cultural contexts. AST adds a nuanced understanding of how both forms of sexism operate differently in diverse environment, providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing gender discrimination. Based on our sample, women in Pakistan face explicit discrimination based on stereotypes and unequal treatment whereas women in the UK experience implicit biases disguised as compliments and reluctance to report for fear of disrupting harmony serve to create barriers. Both scenarios highlight how deeply ingrained societal norms, regardless of their apparent positivity or negativity, can perpetuate workplace gender inequality. We identify strengths and weaknesses in different approaches to addressing workplace gender discrimination. Understanding these dynamics helps design effective interventions and promotes inclusive workplaces globally.

***Theoretical Contribution***

We offer several theoretical contributions. First, we expand theory by endowing educational systems with a central role in lessening patriarchal attitudes that beget GBD in the workplace. Previous assessments have not considered them; thus, we provide a significant proposition that pedagogical development within educational institutions is a crucial means to permanently end GBD in the workplace. However, we acknowledge that education alone cannot resolve systemic issues, as socialization processes also play vital role in shaping attitudes and behaviors.

Second, more specifically, having explored and challenged AST (Glick and Fiske, 2001), we see that while the theory usefully identifies and classifies sexist attitudes, it does not offer sufficient evidence-based advice on how to effectively resist sexism or advance gender equality. The framework delineates women’s experiences from behaviors of men as hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Despite this, ATS does not offer recommendations for how to change them. Thus, the AST conceptualization should be combined with proactive actions and interventions to effectively tackle sexism and advance gender equality. This highlights the necessity for integrated approaches that include both educational and social strategies.

Third, we extend the literature on gender studies. Our study complements social role theory (Eagly, 1987), according to which the more men and women perform different social roles, the more different their behaviors and attitudes will necessarily be; conversely, the more that they perform similar or the same social roles, the more aligned their behaviors and attitudes will be (Henningsen et al., 2022). According to this theory, societal expectations and the consequent roles allocated to genders are the root cause of GBD. Through the lens of social role theory, researchers can examine how established gender roles shape attitudes, actions, and opportunities by examining underexplored and overlooked causes of GBD. Our findings support this perspective, concluding that educational institutions and families can play an important role in reducing GBD. Socialization within families and communities is critical in this process.

We also contribute to Kanter’s (1977) tokenism theory suggesting that having a token employee, typically from a socially skewed group with few members in the workforce, result in their high visibility among staff. This heightened visibility places immense pressure on these individuals to produce work of higher quality and volume, while also conforming to expected stereotypical behaviors. Women in particular have often accepted lower status female token roles, making them more vulnerable to GBD.

Fourth, we highlight the role of family, teachers, and educational institutions in eradicating workplace GBD. Families significantly shape early conceptions of gender roles and expectations in children. Parents may instill respect, equality, and empathy in their children by encouraging candid and inclusive conversations at home. Teachers, in turn, can significantly influence educational provisions. All these stakeholders should find ways to reduce discrimination, acknowledging that educational reform must be complemented by changes in social attitudes.

***Managerial Implications for Organizations***

Organizations working in the service sector in Pakistan and the UK need to be aware of the various sociocultural, economic and legal elements that affect gender dynamics. This information is crucial for developing tailored strategies that successfully address gender discrimination. Recognizing the diversity of these factors, organizations can tailor their strategies to local contexts. Our findings have the potential to guide the creation of global inclusive work cultures and policies that support gender equality, specifically organizations with higher GBD metrics (Masood et al., 2021). By identifying common challenges and distinctive contextual factors, organizations can employ comparative analysis to inform targeted action plans aimed at advancing gender equality. Leaders’ approaches are critical for reducing prejudice based on gender. Employees can also be empowered to identify and effectively confront workplace prejudice through training and development programs on gender equality and employment rights (Opara et al., 2020). While the challenges are significant, strategic and informed efforts can lead to meaningful progress in promoting inclusivity.

***Managerial Implications for Countries and Stakeholders***

First, by comparing Pakistan and the UK, policymakers and other interested parties can better tailor workplace initiatives to combat gender discrimination to each country’s distinct sociocultural, economic and legal contexts. Secondly, programs should concentrate on eliminating obstacles to creating discrimination-free workplaces, such as promoting transparency, increasing self-assurance in reporting discrimination and increasing knowledge of legal rights and corporate policy. Third, the ignored fundamental causes of GBD, such as patriarchal mind-sets reinforced by traditional educational provisions and cultural norms, necessitate comprehensive measures that encompass both educational changes and societal-level interventions. Armed with this knowledge countries may develop inclusive workplaces and advance gender equality on a global scale.

***Limitations and Future Research Directions***

The study has limitations due to its reliance on self-reported data that may be influenced by personal biases. Future research may apply a mixed-method approach. Our research was confined to the service sector across just two specific geographical locations with distinct perspectives (a patriarchal mindset as a by-product of the social and educational systems being an overlooked root cause of GBD). Future research could be applied to other countries and sectors, and identify other causes of the issue, or employ other relevant theories.

**Conclusion**

Our cross-national study on workplace gender-based discrimination (GBD) in the service sectors of Pakistan and the UK reveals the profound impact of socio-cultural norms, legal frameworks, and educational systems on GBD. By contrasting these contexts, we provide valuable insights for organizations, policymakers and stakeholders committed to fostering gender equality. Recognizing that laws alone may not suffice, it is essential to also focus on the active role of companies and managers in implementing inclusive practices. Organizations can develop targeted policies and training programs to address specific cultural biases and provide insight into the legal landscapes. The UK case highlights the pervasive nature of implicit bias, even within robust legal frameworks, indicating the importance of training programs that help employees identify and challenge unconscious stereotypes. This suggests that while legal protections exist, ongoing education and cultural shifts within organizations are critical for real change. Meanwhile, Pakistan’s case emphasizes the critical and fundamental role of education in dismantling GBD, suggesting that collaborative efforts among families, educators, and policymakers can combat entrenched patriarchal mindsets and promote gender-inclusive learning environments. Empowering employees with knowledge of their rights and fostering open communication channels are necessary for encouraging the reporting of discrimination and cultivating a culture of respect. This strategy is essential, especially in situations when people might be reluctant to report discrimination out of concern for the consequences. Furthermore, international cooperation in exchanging best practices can guide the creation of all-encompassing plans for advancing gender equality in the workplace. We pinpoint overlooked root causes and advocate for targeted interventions, thereby empowering stakeholders to create a more inclusive future of work for women globally. By incorporating insights into the effectiveness of existing equality laws and emphasizing the role of organizational culture, we can build a more nuanced understanding of GBD. We hope and believe that our findings can help societies to move closer to dismantling GBD and create truly equitable workplaces for all.

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**Protective Paternalism**

**Complementary Gender Differentiation**

**Heterosexual Intimacy**

**Competitive**

**Gender**

**Differentiation**

**Dominative Paternalism**

**Heterosexual Hostility**

**GBD for Women in the Workplace**

**Figure 1: The Theoretical Model**

Figure by the authors

* Women are reluctant to share their GBD experience and prefer not using legal or organizational platforms for justice due to victim blaming, reputation damage, and a lack of confidence in the system.
* Laws and their implementation are not satisfactory.
* Women accept being inferior due to patriarchal mindset.
* Women are also discriminated against by women.
* Unsatisfactory implementation of organizational rules and regulations, and paucity in the execution of management roles.

*Impediments to the progress of GBD-free workplaces*

*Overlooked root causes*

* Overlooked root causes external to the workplace
* Patriarchal mindsets
* Society and culture
* Parents, teachers, and educational institutions.
* A single-gender education system creating a specific mindset in children that may cause imbalanced personality development around gender equality

*Circumstance and instances of GBD that the majority of women face in the workplace.*

A majority of women face GBD in the following forms and concerns:

* Stereotyping
* A pay gap
* Exclusion
* Being perceived as non-serious
* Being perceived as having low decision-making power
* Resource allocation inequality
* Perceived gossiping and less dependability
* Discouragement

**Figure 2a: Findings from Pakistan’s Data Analysis**

Figure by the authors

* Women sometimes confuse or conflate discrimination and harassment (“too beautiful to do this”).
* Mainly men but women also can discriminate against other women.
* If women try to report implicit discrimination, they can be seen as creating a toxic environment.

Women face implicit GBD in the following forms and concerns:

* Stereotyping
* Exclusion in the allocating of responsibilities and resources
* Being perceived as less competent and a gossip
* A pay gap
* Bullying

*Impediments to the progress of GBD-free workplaces*

*Overlooked root causes*

* Overlooked root causes external to the workplace
* Patriarchal mindsets
* Society and culture
* Parents, teachers, and educational institutions
* A single-gender education system creating a specific mindset in children that may cause imbalanced personality development around gender equality

*Circumstances and instances of GBD that the majority of women face in the workplace*

**Figure 2b: Findings from the UK’s Data Analysis**

Figure by the authors

*Pakistan*

* Women are reluctant to share their GBD experience and prefer not using legal or organizational platforms for justice due to victim blaming, reputational damage, and a lack of confidence in the system.
* Laws and their implementation are not satisfactory.
* Organizational contributions are not satisfactory.
* Women accepted being inferior due to patriarchal mindset
* Women also discriminate against women.
* Implementations of laws and organization management’s role is not satisfactory

UK: Women face implicit GBD in following forms and Concerns

* Stereotyping
* Inequity in nominating and allocating responsibilities and resources.
* Less competent and gossiping
* Pay gap
* Bullying

Ambivalent Sexism

Hostile Sexism

Benevolent Sexism

*United Kingdom*

* Women sometimes confuse or conflate discrimination and harassment (“too beautiful to do this”).
* Mainly men but women can also discriminate against other women.
* If women try to report implicit discrimination, they can be seen as creating a toxic environment.

*Impediments to the progress of GBD-free workplaces*

*Overlooked root causes*

In Pakistan and the UK:

* Overlooked root causes external to the workplace, including:
* Patriarchal mindsets
* Society and culture
* Parents, teachers, and educational institutions
* A single-gender education system (Pakistan) creating a specific mindset in children that may cause imbalanced personality development around gender equality

*Circumstance & instances of GBD a majority of women face in the Workplace.*

Pakistan: A majority of women face GBD in these forms and concerns:

* Stereotyping
* A pay gap
* Exclusion
* Being perceived as non-serious
* Being perceived as having low decision-making power
* Resource allocation inequality
* Perceived gossiping and less dependable
* Discouragement

**Figure 3: Comparison Model of the Findings from Both Countries**

Figure by the authors