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Unequal Punishment of Women and Minorities in the Workplace

Jorden Woodson

Kutztown, jordenwoodson123@gmail.com

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Jorden Woodson

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Unequal Punishment of Women and Minorities in the Workplace

In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin. This act was a beacon of hope, as it ended segregation and provided people of color and women with more opportunities. But even then, it didn't fix everything as society still found a way to put women and people of color down. Crimes and hateful acts against people of color were ignored. Women weren't (and still aren't) taken seriously in the workplace. As society has progressed, it has become more accepting. But there are still instances of racism and sexism, especially in ways that may not be clear to everyone. This can be seen in the workplace as unequal punishment for different employees.

In the *Time* article "Women Don't Just Face a Pay Gap at Work. They're Also Punished Far More Than Men," professor Michele Gelfand and doctoral student Virginia Choi argue the pay gap is not the only form of discrimination women and minorities face in the workplace, they also face unequal discipline. Gelfand and Choi assert women and minorities live in "tighter worlds," while white men live in "looser worlds." Meaning women and minorities are subjected to harsher punishments than white men for the same misdeeds or mistakes. These instances of unequal discipline in a work environment can lead to demotion, wage drops, and loss of opportunity. Gelfand and Choi cite their own study as evidence reporting "The white male participants preferred higher levels of punishment for culprits who were female or black, but showed much greater mercy and leniency toward other white male participants." (par. 5) Gelfand and Choi insist that after a woman or minority has faced unequal punishment and has been fired,

they may experience a longer period of unemployment than their white male coworkers. This may affect their future chances for employment as well. Gelfand and Choi claim this unequal punishment may not only affect employees, but also their companies. In a study, cited by the authors, done in the financial adviser industry, it was found that “male financial advisers with a past record of misconduct were roughly two times more likely to be future repeat offenders than female advisers. Additionally, resolving the misconduct of male employees was 20% more costly on firms.” (par. 8) This means that this act of discrimination is not only harmful to employees, but also to companies as fixing these mistakes can be costly. Gelfand and Choi conclude by urging readers to “consider the many deeper systematic forms of discrimination that exist in our workplaces and within ourselves.” (par. 9)

I agree with Gelfand and Choi that women and minorities in “tighter” worlds in which they must be more careful of what they say and do. This idea has been present for centuries, as white men are usually the ones making decisions and holding the power. This occurrence is not only seen in the workplace, but also in family dynamics, friend groups, and schools. Plenty of female students, daughters, sisters, and women in general have complained about being punished more harshly than their peers, siblings, or coworkers. Women and minorities are constantly put under a microscope, where everything they do and say is criticized. Gelfand and Choi’s main argument is that women face discrimination at work on multiple fronts including the pay gap and unequal punishment. As a woman and person of color, the finding of their studies is worrying. Seeing that one misstep could cost me my job and potentially future jobs is worrying.

This phenomenon is rooted in the racism and sexism that has been going on since the creation of America. The unequal punishment is a smaller-scale version of the discrimination women and minorities had to face all those years ago. Even then, the unequal punishment still affects women and minorities once they leave their company, making it worse. This is not only

present in the workplace, but also in schools. Many black students have reported being punished harder than their white peers. These punishments not only affect the students while they are in school but also when they graduate. This phenomenon can also be observed in the household. I have a friend who is the eldest daughter, and she would often tell me stories of the unequal treatment she would get from her parents. Her brother, who is only 1 or 2 years younger, would be allowed to lay around all day, do no chores or homework, while she had to pick up his slack. I believe this is rooted in the idea that women are meant to be “homemakers.” This idea tells women they are meant to stay home, cook, clean and be good idea. Many traditional parents teach their daughters home skills, like cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, while teaching their sons more “practical” skills, like using tools, fixing cars, managing money. While this tradition is being broken, it’s evident that it is still prominent in this time.

Many people over the years have claimed that racism and sexism cannot and does not happen in this day and age. “There are laws against it, so it can’t happen.” While this may be true, the prominent acts of racism that happened 100’s of years ago is being done, but in smaller ways. This comes in the form of microaggressions based on both race and gender, stereotypes, familiar pressures, and even gendered products. Examples of this include a storeowner following a non-white patron around their store, ‘mansplaining,’ insensitive jokes, not taking women seriously and many others. Acts like these happen on an everyday basis and can go on without notice. On a larger scale there are hate crimes, police brutality against people of color, and abusive language toward women and people of color. While there are laws against these acts, they are still happening in a way the laws do not recognize.

Some people may read these ideas and come to the conclusion that I believe all white men are racist and sexist and are the cause of all racism and sexism happening today. While I do believe the contribute heavily, not every white man is racist and sexist. These ideas are learned,

they are not something someone is born with. Some people may do harmful things and not even realize how it affects others. These people may not even realize they are saying or doing hurtful things because they have learned their words or actions are “normal,” or “regular.” These ideas come from a broken system that keep women and minorities at the bottom and white men at the top.

In conclusion, the disparity in punishment of women and minorities is a pressing issue that needs to be discussed. In discussing these issues, we are not ignoring them or forgetting they exist. By addressing these issues, society can move forward in promoting diversity and fair treatment. While it may be a while before this kind of discrimination, and racism and sexism as whole, is completely gone, we can implement solutions starting with the workplace. This can include enforcing fair and clear policies regarding disciplinary actions, providing diversity and inclusion training for employees, and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency. We as civilians can also educate ourselves on the hardship's women and minorities face and how to identify them. Individuals may not be able to do much, but together we can urge organizations and employers to do more for their employees.

Works Cited

Gelfand, Michele, and Virginia Choi. "Women Don't Just Face a Pay Gap at Work. They're Also Punished Far More Than Men." *Time*, 2 Apr. 2019, time.com/5562441/equal-pay-wage-punishment-gap/. Accessed 25 Oct. 2023.