

# **Disparity in Discrimination: A Study on the Experience of Minority Women in the Workplace**

**Hannah Green**

## *Abstract*

Cultural relations between majority and minority groups have always been a source of tension, and minority group treatment is often compared to majority group treatment in academic studies. Research comparing two minority groups is often left undone because many think that “who has it worse” battles tend to be pointless. Therefore, research comparing two different minority groups must be done in a way that does not try to argue that one minority is treated worse; rather, it must bring to light the fact that each minority faces its own version of discrimination, and that all problems that minorities experience cannot be treated with a “blanket cure” that has been successful for a single minority. By studying previous works that target discrimination against a single minority, this research compares the experiences of African American women and Latin American women with discrimination in the workplace in the United States. Specifically, sexual harassment and the wage gap were investigated in the cases of these two minority groups. These two aspects of discrimination are important because they demonstrate the economic, cultural, and emotional impacts of discrimination. While the study found that both groups of women are hyper-sexualized as minority members, the way that their respective communities react to such harassment is very different. Regarding the wage gap, both Black and Latina women have been heavily stereotyped, which has impeded their ability to move up into positions of higher pay. Both groups also lack the access to education and opportunity that would allow them to attain higher paying jobs. Even though both have similar experiences, the reasons behind their lack of opportunity and education are different.

“Discrimination is defined as denying others equality of treatment based on their group membership (Allport, 1954).” Women and minorities are both subject to such discrimination, and, according to Berdahl and Moore (2006), minority women not only face the “double whammy” of being both women and minority members at an additive rate, their discrimination is felt at a multiplicative rate. This means that the discrimination they face cannot be separated into “women problems” and “ethnic problems,” rather, the two combine to create an even worse level of discrimination (Berdahl and Moore, 2006). The intersectionality of discrimination has been studied in many different ways, but different experiences of intersectional sexism and racism are usually not studied concurrently.

Due to the size of their study, published as *Workplace harassment: Double jeopardy for minority women*, Berdahl and Moore were not

able to examine the differences between the types of discrimination felt by each group of minority women and were forced to combine all minority women into one category in order to have sufficient data. Much research has been done both before and after Berdahl and Moore’s work that indicates minority women’s differences in experiences can be studied and compared. This study will examine two types of discrimination in relation to black and Latina women: sexual harassment and salary.

Black women experience sexual harassment in the workplace that is different from the experiences of other women because they are affected as both women and members of the black community. Clinical psychologists Nicole T. Buchanan and Alayne J. Ormerod (2002) suggest that, “Sometimes [this involves] drawing on stereotypes of black women, for example, the assumption that African-American women are

hyper-sexual.” This view that black women are inherently more sexual creates a culture which targets black women for sexual harassment. According to Tanya K. Hernandez, Fordham University School of Law, black women are overrepresented as complainants in sexual harassment cases. For example, in 1992, an EEOC study showed that 14.4% of sexual harassment charges were made by black women and only 11.5% of the work force was black women. On top of this disparity, it is shown that women of color are less likely to report sexual harassment in the workplace because they have higher rates of job dismissal and difficulty finding jobs (Hernandez, 2000).

In Dr. Carolyn West’s article, *Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and their Homegirls* (2008), she explains the history of the perceived promiscuity of the black woman, referring back to Jamestown, Virginia, and the violent and terrible raping of the first slave women. Because the black woman was assaulted so many times throughout United States’ history, she was presented as an image of someone who could not be a victim because she loved sex (West, 2008). Modern day media and social culture also project this stereotype on black women; roles for “sexual background twerking” (see Miley Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop”) are far more common for a black woman than the “girl next door” in music videos. A lack of examples for a black “girl next door” supports this point. These socially learned mentalities pervade society and create a workplace environment that categorizes black women as deserving of harassment rather than as victims.

Negative perceptions of black women within the black community often drive the harassment experience. In a study done on the perceptions of black men on black women, it was concluded that a large portion thought that, “black women were, in part at least, responsible for the relative low status of black men. Those respondents who had a pessimistic view of black male-black female relationships...preferred traditional gender roles for men and women.” Not only does hyper-sexualization of black women contribute

to their high levels of harassment, but the community in which they live tends to blame them for the low status of black men. There could be a correlation between these two things in that black women are viewed as sexual beings rather than human beings, and black men think that this in part hurts their image.

Black women also face a terrible obstacle in terms of salary equality. While many may have heard of the recent celebrity outcry of women making \$1.00 to every \$1.22 a man makes, the reality is that that number is very inflated by the white woman’s pay. In comparison, black women only make \$1.00 for every \$1.36 that a white man makes (Information Please Database, 2013). Stereotypes of the black woman are a huge factor when considering this wage inequality. In regards to the difference between black and white women, the study *Racial Differences in Access to High-Paying Jobs and the Wage Gap between Black and White Women* reports, “They find that differences in workers’ measured characteristics explain little of either the observed occupational segregation by race or the racial wage gap in 1988. Further analysis suggests that several changes in the wage structure for women during the 1980s, notably a widening of occupational wage differentials and an increase in the returns to education, abetted direct discrimination in enlarging the racial wage gap among women (Anderson & Shapiro, 1996).” Basically, black women, even when they are able to have the same education, opportunity, and qualifications as white women, are not as likely to have higher paying jobs.

For Latina women, sexual harassment in the workplace often takes a different form than it does for black women. While they are also hyper-sexualized, Latina women generally need to deal with a different reaction in their communities. According to Dragow, et al. (2002),

Unlike institutions such as the family that have evolved from traditional [and] patriarchal models, sexual norms remain quite traditional and relatively male-dominated in Latin society. In this

context, Latinos may perceive a woman's experience of sexual harassment simply as sexual contact with a man who is not the husband—a serious violation of cultural norms. Therefore endorsement of more traditional or conservative attitudes toward sexuality may exacerbate the severity of unwanted, gender-related workplace behavior for Latina employees.

Latina women are not only more likely to be sexually harassed as both minority members and women, they are also more likely to be shamed and excommunicated from their culture for it due to an out-dated way of thinking.

Latina women also suffer from the worst paying salaries in the United States. While they make \$1.00, a white man makes \$1.46 (Information Please Database, 2013). This disparity is a huge reflection of the box that Latina women have been put into as low wage workers or incapable of handling a job at all. Latina women are often portrayed in the media as “hot-blooded lovers and/ or gang members” says Ediberto Roman (2000). For example, in the movie *Mi Vida Loca*, set around a group of Latina gang members, these girls fight for the affection of a male gang member, thus reinforcing stereotypes. Moreover, the film ends with the announcement that one of the “homegirls” is getting a job, something that is clearly shocking to the rest of the girls (Roman, 2000). This “shock factor” that a Latina woman could even get a job in the first place only helps to highlight the stereotypes that Latinas face when they enter the job market. Other movies portray Latinas as, “negative and stereotypic

images of Latinos immigrants. For instance, different TV shows and Hollywood movies represent Latino females as maids, housekeepers and nannies (e.g., *The Kids Are All Right*, *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*, *The Perez Family*). Latina women are also portrayed as submissive and obedient women who can do anything for their families and jobs (e.g., *Spanglish*.” (Lopez, 2013). These stereotypes not only are harmful to the Latina woman's image of herself, but also affect her ability to get jobs at higher paying levels. Internalized racism dictates that many perceive Latina women as no more than secretary material at best, and cannot perceive Latina women in an occupation in a position of power.

Understanding these differences in the way that Latina and black women experience discrimination in the workplace is extremely important to determining how they can be changed. Both groups suffer from hypersexualization and have cultures that perceive their sexuality in ways that hurt their image and bar them from the justice they deserve in cases of sexual harassment. They also suffer from debilitating stereotypes that make moving into positions that pay better nearly impossible. While there may be laws that prohibit discrimination in the workplace, we are often not aware of internalized racism interacting intersectionally with sexism that could be affecting our decisions and the decisions of those in hiring positions. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of these stereotypes so that we can make decisions based on merit while understanding that we may have some internalized prejudice that needs to be taken fully into account.

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