

# **General employee perceptions of gender-based discrimination in a selection of South African organisations**

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## **Abstract**

Gender-based discrimination is prohibited in many countries, including South Africa. Despite this prohibition, employees continue to report discrimination. These perceptions affect individuals and organisations negatively.

The aim of this research was to gauge the levels of perceived gender-based discrimination and to comment on gender differences in this respect. Information was gathered from 1 740 employees working for 29 organisations, using the Fair Treatment at Work Survey and the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire.

Percentage-wise more women reported incidents of discrimination at work, gender being the primary reason for discrimination. Men also reported discrimination, but this was less often. Some women reported pro-male discrimination and other women pro-female discrimination. The same pattern applied was found with men. Each group perceiving similar levels of discrimination, both in their favour and against them, supporting social identity theory and conceptions about group-serving bias.

The central finding was that both male and female employees experience the negative effects of perceived discrimination. Therefore it is recommended that interventions dealing with gender discrimination should be directed at both gender groups, as both need to deal with the consequences of experiencing discrimination in the workplace.

## **Key phrases**

*discrimination; employee; gender; human resources management; perception; South Africa*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Discrimination can be defined as actions whereby some are afforded benefits and others are denied access to them (Grogan 2007). Discrimination could be either individual or group-

based. Cascio (2010), for example, states that discrimination involves a group of individuals being given preferential treatment over others.

This is typical of gender-based discrimination. Channar, Abbassi and Ujan (2011) concur, declaring that gender-based discrimination constitutes giving the members of one gender either an unfair advantage or disadvantaging them in comparison with the members of the other group. Parziale (2007) emphasises that gender discrimination can be directed at an individual or a group, maintaining that gender discrimination is the prejudicial treatment of an individual or group on the grounds of gender.

## **2. GENDER DISCRIMINATION AND THE LAW**

Gender-based discrimination is unlawful in South Africa. The highest law of the country, the Constitution, makes it clear that “the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, *gender*, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth” (Republic of South Africa 1996:3). The Constitution states more specifically the aim of creating a society reflective of non-racialism and *non-sexism* (Republic of South Africa 1996).

So important is this issue to the South African government that the Constitution also makes provision for a Commission for Gender Equality, which “has the power, as regulated by national legislation, necessary to perform its functions, including the power to monitor, investigate, research, educate, lobby, advise and report on issues concerning *gender equality*” (Republic of South Africa 1996:63). This prohibition of gender-based discrimination as set out in the Constitution is mirrored in South African labour legislation.

The Labour Relations Act (Republic of South Africa 1995), for example, states specifically that “unfair discrimination is prohibited, either directly or indirectly, against an employee on any arbitrary ground, including, but not limited to race, gender, sex, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, political opinion, culture, language, marital status or family responsibility” (Republic of South Africa 1995:141).

The government may have many reasons for promoting the rights of women, which could include both a preference for the moral high ground and party political gains. However, there

are important business reasons why gender-based discrimination should be addressed at the organisational level. The first of these is employee health.

### 3. CONSEQUENCES OF (GENDER) DISCRIMINATION

Perceptions of being discriminated against may have a negative impact on the general well-being of those who harbour perceptions of being victims of discrimination<sup>1</sup> (Foley, Ngo & Loi 2006; Krieger 1990; Pascoe & Richman 2009; Pavalko, Mossakowski & Hamilton 2003). This specifically affects female employees (Corning & Krenagal 2002), possibly because some working mothers are placed in a position where their employers see them as “bad mothers” for investing time and resources in their careers and at the same time as “bad workers” for devoting time and attention to their families (Iberiyenari 2012; Jamieson 1995). Chabaya, Rembe and Wadesango (2009) elaborate on this, maintaining that women’s positions are made problematic by wide-spread perceptions that their role in the family overrides all other roles.

The effects of perceived discrimination on well-being include psychological outcomes (Schmitt, Branscombe, Garcia & Postmes 2014) such as higher stress levels (Channar *et al.* 2011; Huynh, Devos & Dunbar 2012; Sanchez & Brock 1996; Schmitt, Maes & Widaman 2010), anxiety (Corning & Krenagal 2002; Huynh *et al.* 2012), and depression (Corning & Krenagal 2002; Huynh *et al.* 2012; Noh & Kaspar 2003), as well as medical conditions, such as hypertension (Krieger 1990) and the effects of substance abuse (Ro & Choi 2010).

Ro and Choi (2010:211) state that “...gender discrimination was certainly linked with both lifetime and recent solid drug usage”. Williams, Neighbors and Jackson (2003) report consistent findings that perceptions of discrimination tend to be associated with poorer health across a broad range of mental health outcomes, and this occurs across socially disadvantaged groups in different societies. Kim and Williams (2012) echo this and report mounting evidence that discriminatory experiences can harm health and are associated with poor self-rated health. Theories on relative deprivation, and particularly fraternal relative deprivation, could explain the effects of perceived discrimination on well-being (Schmitt *et al.* 2010). The effects of perceived discrimination are, however, not limited to general well-being but they also have a direct effect on the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> The perception of discriminatory treatment may be as important as actual inequality (Banerjee 2006).

Job specific outcomes associated with perceived discrimination include increased absenteeism and lower productivity (Abbas, Athar & Herani 2010; Abbas, Hameed & Waheed 2011; Russell, Quinn, King-O’Riain & McGinnity 2008). Discrimination also has a negative effect on job satisfaction (Channar *et al.* 2011; Ensher, Grant-Vallone & Donaldson 2001; Goldman, Slaughter, Schmit, Wiley & Brooks 2008; Özer & Günlück 2010; Sanchez & Brock 1996), organisational commitment (Channar *et al.* 2011; Ensher *et al.* 2001; Goldman *et al.* 2008; Sanchez & Brock 1996), organisational citizenship behaviour (Ensher *et al.* 2001), and turnover intentions (Abbas *et al.* 2010; Bose 2011; Goldman *et al.* 2008; Özer & Günlück 2010).

All of these may have serious consequences for the survival of the organisation. However, clear policies could dispel the effects of perceived discrimination. Abbas *et al.* (2010) emphasise the importance of providing gender discrimination policy guidelines, which they believe would enhance employee performance and increase their work motivation and satisfaction. Harris, Lievens and Van Hoyer (2004) maintain that, if an organisation is reputed to have “healthy” diversity policies, the perception of being discriminated against is less pronounced than it would be if such policies did not exist. Furthermore, according to Loden and Rosener (1991), companies that manage diversity reap a number of positive benefits, such as increased productivity, a higher rate of retention and a greater ability to recruit high-potential candidates. Along the same lines, but focusing on the negative, Bose (2011) suggests that, if an organisation’s image projects unfair discriminatory policies, its relationship with present and potential clients may also be hampered.

These comments indicate that perceived discrimination may affect employees negatively. The aim of this research was to gauge the current levels of perceived gender-based discrimination in a selection of South African companies. This aim was deemed important because of the negative effects of such perceptions on employees and to gauge whether perceptions of gender equality still exist among employees, despite measures taken to alleviate gender inequality.

#### **4. PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION AND GROUP MEMBERSHIP**

Social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Turner & Reynolds 2004) and group-serving bias (Pettigrew 1997) are theories that may explain the prevalence of perceived discrimination, even among groups that are similar in many ways, such as male and female employees.

Social identity theory states, inter alia, that individuals contrast their own group (in-group) with others (out-group) and develop a favourable bias towards their own (Myers 2008).

The concept of group-serving bias goes a step further. Here, in-group members explain away, or negate, the *positive* behaviours of out-group members (attributing them to situational circumstances) and ascribe *negative* behaviours disproportionately to out-group members' dispositions (personality and values), rather than more appropriately to situational circumstances (Myers 2008). It may thus be the mere fact of membership of a specific group that creates prejudice against another group, as was found in the seminal Robbers Cave Experiment by Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif (1961). It may be this "natural" prejudice between groups that drives perceived discrimination.

The use of social identity theory is encouraged in the South African context of gender research (Finchilescu 2006). Research by Steyn (2012) on racial discrimination demonstrates the value of such an approach. In this research, it was found that black South Africans scored higher on a measure of modern racism (designed to measure discrimination against black individuals) than did white South Africans (mean 23.4 versus 19.2), and that whites scored higher than blacks on a measure of modern racism (with an instrument that measures discrimination against whites; mean 22.5 versus 16.3).

The group-serving bias is corroborated by several research reports, including the report by Hunter, Stringer and Watson (1991) on violence in Ireland. The authors reported how Catholics attributed violent acts committed by their own group more to contextual causes (78.1%), and less to internal causes (dispositions; 17.9%). Protestants, however, commented on the same acts by saying that these actions were initiated by disposition (79.2%) rather than by situational circumstances (20.8%). Hunter *et al.* (1991) reported the same pattern for violence committed by Protestants. Protestants attributed the actions of their own group to contextual causes (71.5%) rather than to internal causes (28.5%), while Catholics reported a completely contrary picture (28.5% blamed on external causes and 71.5% attributed to contextual causes). These results suggest support for both theories when considering two groups that are comparable in many ways. In such cases both groups experience prejudice against the other at a similar level.

It may therefore be concluded that similar levels of prejudice between groups exist, based on the human condition rather than on objective realities.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Respondents

The respondents in this research were employees of relatively large organisations, as the sample frame required at least 30 male and 30 female voluntary employees per company. The organisations approached were those to which students enrolled for the Master of Business Leadership programme at the Unisa Graduate School of Business Leadership had access, primarily on account of their own employment in these organisations. It was therefore a convenient sample of organisations (Rosnow & Rosenthal 2008). A name list of employees was used to draw a stratified random sample (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister 2009) of respondents, using computer generated random numbers.

### 5.2 Procedure and approach

A critical rationalist approach (Higgs & Smith 2006) was followed. This approach is positivistic in nature with an emphasis on hypothesis testing. This approach was deemed appropriate as an “objective analysis” of “objective data” was required, given that groups which hold mutually exclusive goals (Pettigrew 1997; Tajfel 1981; Turner & Reynolds 2004) were involved. Subjectivity should be minimized in such cases.

The method of data collection was surveys which suggest a quantitative study. As the data was collected at a particular point in time, and only once, it implies a cross-sectional design. The cross-sectional design is suitable for describing the population and relationships between variables (Shaughnessy *et al.* 2009).

Data on discrimination was collected by means of the Fair Treatment at Work Survey (Grainger & Fitzner 2007) and the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire (developed for this study). Respondents were asked to rank items (using the Fair Treatment at Work Survey) and to select options (in the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire). Before the employees were asked to complete the questionnaires, they were given standard informed consent forms. After consenting, they were requested to answer all the questions that applied to them. The respondents were asked to base their answers on personal experience, and not on their perceptions of what generally occurs in their workplace.

### 5.3 Measurements

Employees were asked three questions on their work situation. The first two were from the Fair Treatment at Work Survey (Grainger & Fitzner 2007). The first question read as follows: "In the past two years with this organisation, have you been treated unfairly because of any of the following?" The respondents could select any one (or more) of 19 possible reasons for having been treated unfairly. This list included age, gender, nationality, religion, race or ethnic group, and 14 other possible reasons. The second question, also from the Fair Treatment at Work Survey, related to unfair treatment, specifically the consequences of such treatment. It read as follows: "To what did the unfair treatment you have personally experienced relate?" The respondents could select any one (or more) of 18 possible consequences of being treated unfairly. These included salary, pension, other benefits, perks and bonuses besides pay, and 13 other possibilities. The data generated was ranked in order of the frequency of endorsements.

Question 3 related to access to the organisational resources and was comprised of four similar sub-questions. In answer to the first sub-question, the respondents had to select one of three options: (1) It is easier for a woman to get appointed to this organisation than it is for a man; (2) It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get appointed to this organisation; and (3) It is easier for a man to get appointed to this organisation than it is for a woman. The next three sub-questions were identical in structure to the first, except that the content related to promotion, access to training and development, and equal work for equal pay, instead of to appointments. This measure was called the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, which was developed specifically for this research. Answers were treated as categorical data.

### 5.4 Data analysis

The data was presented as frequencies, and per gender, as gender differences in scores, based on social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Turner & Reynolds 2004) were expected. In the case of the Fair Treatment at Work Survey the statistical difference in ranking between the gender groups was calculated using the Spearman rank-order correlation formula. The differences between the scores for males and females on the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire were calculated using the Pearson chi-square test. In all cases a significant level of less than 0.01 was seen as significant.

## 5.5 Ethical considerations

Several ethical considerations are applicable. The first is the use (exploitation) of students as fieldworkers. They were master students employed at the different participating organisations. The students benefitted from collecting the data, which they used when writing their Master of Business Leadership research reports.

A possible second ethical concern could be that students accessed respondents in the organisations where they were working, which allowed them undue influence over the respondents. This matter was partially addressed by the requirement that the Chief Executive Officer or Director-General first had to grant permission to conduct the research (suggesting that the student did not have ultimate authority in the setting). The students also had to obtain consent from the respondents. The informed consent form clearly stated that participation in the survey was voluntary and all the respondents provided consent before entering into the research.

## 6. RESULTS

In total, data from 1 740 questionnaires from employees working at 29 companies was captured. The employees were primarily from financial service providers (seven organisations), the government (seven organisations), and the mining sector (four organisations). Other sectors included the hospitality industry, the manufacturing industry and agriculture.

The results to Question 1, on the type of discrimination to which employees are exposed, are presented in Table 1.

The type of discrimination most frequently reported by females was gender-based, which had been experienced by 13.8% of all the female respondents. This was higher than the gender-based discrimination reported by males, who numbered 10.3%. The reason for discrimination most often cited by males was racial bias (10.9%). Race was the second most frequently-cited reason for discrimination in the case of females. The Spearman rank-order correlation of 0.890 was significant at the 0.001 level. The rankings were therefore similar, suggesting that males and females both experience these types of discrimination in the workplace.



**TABLE 1: Sources of unfair treatment at work**

Question 1 In the last two years with “this organisation” have you been treated unfairly because of any of the following?	Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Males (N=871)			Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Females (N=868)		
	Count	%	Rank	Count	%	Rank
My age	91	10.4	2	71	8.2	4
My gender	90	10.3	3	120	13.8	1
My nationality	36	4.1	11	50	5.8	7.5
My religion	27	3.1	14	29	3.3	15
My race or ethnic group	95	10.9	1	93	10.7	2
My sexual orientation	18	2.1	16.5	21	2.4	18
My disability	8	.9	18	19	2.2	19
My long-term illness	18	2.1	16.5	22	2.5	17
My marital status	35	4.0	12	45	5.2	12
My political beliefs	26	3.1	15	26	3.0	16
My skin colour	89	10.2	4	82	9.4	3
My physical appearance	30	3.4	13	46	5.3	10.5
The way I dress	41	4.7	7.5	70	8.1	5
Being pregnant	9	1.0	19	39	4.5	14
Union membership	38	4.4	10	50	5.8	7.5
Accent or the way I speak	47	5.4	5	47	5.4	9
Address or where I live	39	4.5	9	41	4.7	13
My social class	43	4.9	6	46	5.3	10.4
My family responsibilities	41	4.7	7.5	61	7.0	6
Total	821			978		

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

As the main focus of this research is on gender-based discrimination, the significance of this difference in gender-based discrimination should be considered in greater detail. Table 2 provides information on the count data in a two-by-two table reflecting gender (male / female) and reported discrimination (yes / no).

**TABLE 2: Perceived discrimination during appointments by gender**

Question	Gender	
	Female	Male
No: No gender discrimination	749 (86.2%)	780 (89.7%)
Yes: Gender discrimination	120 (13.8%)	90 (10.3%)
Total	869 (100.0%)	870 (100.0%)

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

In Table 2, as in Table 1, it can be observed that 13.8% females reported gender discrimination, while 10.3% of males did so. The Pearson chi-square value was 4.914 (degrees of freedom = 1) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) was equal to 0.027, and more than 0.01, which indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency are not dependent. Males and females therefore did not differ in the degree to which they reported on gender-based discrimination.

When it comes to the perceived consequences of discrimination, three elements stand out.

In Table 3, it can be seen that for both male and female respondents the most frequently-reported discrimination concerned remuneration. It is of interest that, percentagewise, more males reported this negative effect.

Both males and females reported that discrimination affected their perks and benefits, while the third most frequently-mentioned effect of discrimination was that of promotion. The Spearman rank order correlation of 0.894 was significant at the 0.001 level. The rankings were therefore similar, suggesting that the workplace consequences of discrimination experienced by males and females are comparable.

The results pertaining to data gathered by means of the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire are presented in the following tables.

The question on the fairness of the appointment process was answered by 1 733 respondents (seven missing values). Most respondents (61.3%) selected the middle option, indicating that no discrimination occurred during this process.

**TABLE 3: Consequences of unfair treatment**

Question 2 To what did the unfair treatment you have personally experienced relate too?	Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Males (N=871)			Number of endorsements, percentage, and rankings: Females (N=869)		
	Count	%	Rank	Count	%	Rank
The pay you receive	205	23.5	1	183	21.1	1
Your pension	55	6.3	12.5	48	5.5	15
Other benefits, perks and bonuses, besides pay	176	20.2	2	167	19.2	2
Your working hours	94	10.8	8	106	12.2	8
Taking holidays	90	10.3	9	104	12.0	9
Applying for a job (horizontal movement)	113	13.0	6	109	12.5	7
Being promoted (vertical movement)	169	19.4	3	162	18.6	3
Receiving training	122	14.0	5	116	13.3	5
Disciplinary action	55	6.3	12.5	39	4.5	16
Redundancy	22	2.5	17	33	3.8	17
Early retirement	14	1.6	18	13	1.5	18
Being allowed to work flexibly (changing hours of work)	50	5.7	14.5	81	9.3	10
Being ignored	125	14.4	4	134	15.4	4
Being excluded from social activities	50	5.7	14.5	73	8.4	12
Not being part of social group	38	4.4	16	54	6.2	14
Type of work given	75	8.6	10	114	13.1	6
Bullying/ harassment	60	6.9	11	75	8.6	11
Falsely accused of something	96	7.9	7	72	8.3	13
Total	1609			1983		

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

Differences in scores between male and female perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value of 73.335 (degrees of freedom = 2). The asymptotic significance (2-sided) was smaller than 0.001, and less than 0.01, indicating that the rows and columns of the contingency are dependent. It can be seen in Table 4 that males reported pro-female discrimination (29.1%), while females reported pro-male discrimination (22.3%). Both groups

thus negated the achievements of the other, providing support for the group-serving bias (Pettigrew 1997). The difference between perceived pro-female and perceived pro-male discrimination was 6.8%.

**TABLE 4: Perceived discrimination during appointments by gender**

Question	Gender	
	Female	Male
It is easier for a woman to get appointed at ... than it is for a man.	133 (15.4%)	253 (29.1%)
It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get appointed at ...	539 (62.3%)	523 (60.3%)
It is easier for a man to get appointed at ... than it is for a woman.	193 (22.3%)	92 (10.6%)
Total	865 (100%)	868 (100%)

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

Regarding the promotion process 1 732 cases were examined (eight missing values). As with appointments, a large percentage of employees (62.0%) selecting the middle option reported no difference in the way males and females were treated.

**TABLE 5: Perceived discrimination with regard to promotions by gender**

Question	Gender	
	Female	Male
It is easier for a woman to get promoted at ... than it is for a man.	117 (13.5%)	242 (27.9%)
It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get promoted at ...	533 (61.6%)	541 (62.4%)
It is easier for a man to get promoted at ... than it is for a woman.	215 (24.9%)	84 (9.7%)
Total	865 (100%)	867 (100%)

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

Differences between male and female perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being 100.97 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) smaller than 0.001, and less than 0.01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency are dependent. It can be seen in Table 5 that males reported pro-female

discrimination (27.9%), while females reported pro-male discrimination (24.9%). The difference between perceived pro-female and perceived pro-male discrimination was 3.0%.

Regarding access to training and development, 1 729 cases in total were examined (11 missing values). In the case of the previous reports, most employees (75.8%) reported that males and females were treated equally.

**TABLE 6: Perceived discrimination with regard to access to training and development by gender**

Question	Gender	
	Female	Male
It is easier for a woman to get access to training and development at ... than it is for a man.	81 (9.4%)	146 (16.8%)
It is equally difficult for a man or a woman to get access to training and development at ...	648 (75.3%)	662 (76.3%)
It is easier for a man to get access to training and development at ... than it is for a woman	132 (15.3%)	60 (6.9%)
Total	861 (100%)	868 (100%)

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

Differences between male and female perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being 45.734 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) smaller than 0.001, and less than 0.01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency are dependent. It can be seen in Table 6 that males reported pro-female discrimination (16.8%), while females reported pro-male discrimination (15.3%). The difference between perceived pro-female and perceived pro-male discrimination was 1.5%.

When it came to equal work for equal pay 1 727 cases were examined (13 missing values). As with the previous reports, most employees (76.5%) reported that males and females were treated equally.

The differences between male and female perceptions were calculated, with the Pearson chi-square value being 89.836 (degrees of freedom = 2) and the asymptotic significance (2-sided) smaller than 0.001, and less than 0.01. This indicates that the rows and columns of the contingency are dependent. It can be read in Table 7 that males reported pro-female

discrimination (11.6%), while females reported pro-male discrimination (22.9%). The difference between perceived pro-female and perceived pro-male discrimination was 11.3%.

**TABLE 7: Perceived discrimination with regard to equal-work for equal pay by gender**

Question	Gender	
	Female	Male
Generally women get paid more than what would equate to their inputs, compared to men	33 (3.8%)	100 (11.5%)
The rule of equal work for equal pay is enforced at ...	632 (73.3%)	689 (79.7%)
Generally men get paid more than what would equate to their inputs, compared to women	197 (22.9%)	76 (8.8%)
Total	862 (100%)	865 (100%)

Source: Authors' compilation based on survey results

For the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, most employees reported the absence of discrimination in the workplace (average across items = 68.6%). Some women reported a pro-male bias (average across items = 21.35%) and others a pro-female bias (average across items = 10.52%). The same pattern applies to men, reporting pro-female (average across items = 21.35%) and pro-male (average across items = 9.00%) discrimination.

## 7. DISCUSSION

The results are discussed focusing on the specific characteristics of the reported sampled, then perceived discrimination in general, and lastly focusing specifically on perceived gender-based discrimination.

### 7.1 Discussion of the sample

During this research, information was gathered from general employees in relatively large organisations. The absolute size of these groups (at least 30 male and 30 female staff members) made the inclusion of predominantly top or senior managers highly unlikely, as very few companies have in the region of 60 top or senior managers. The respondents were thus most likely to be supervisors and general employees at lower levels of the organisation. The nature of the groups sampled should contribute to the body of knowledge, as many

previous reports on gender discrimination focused mainly on senior employees (e.g. April, Dreyer & Blass 2007; Booysen 2007; Johnson & Mathur-Helm 2011; Msweli-Mbanga, Fitzgerald & Mkhize 2005; Zulu 2003). This research fills a lacuna by considering the perceptions of employees at lower organisational levels.

It is also important to note that data was collected from 1 740 employees at 29 companies. Although this was a convenient sample of companies, it represents a large number of randomly-selected respondents from a broad selection of companies, unlike several other studies with limited sample sizes and focused just on specific industries (e.g. Boshoff 2005; Kahn 2009; Kane-Berman & Hickman 2003; Lloyd & Mey 2007; Montesh 2010). Apart from the South African study by Thomas (2002), which was conducted across several organisations, this article makes a contribution in constituting the first broad-based research of this nature in South Africa.

## **7.2 Perceived discrimination**

Regarding the Fair Treatment at Work Survey, most employees seemed to agree that gender discrimination did not affect them directly. In total, 87.9% reported that they had not been exposed personally to gender-based discrimination during the past two years. When asked about gender-based discrimination in workplace processes, the average scores using the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire were substantially lower at 68.9% (The scores were 61.3% for the appointment processes, 62.0% at the promotional level, 75.8% for training and development, and 76.5% for equal pay for equal work.) It can thus be noted that more than 60% of all employees perceive the workplace to be free of gender-based discrimination.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that the Fair Treatment at Work Survey solicits information on personally-experienced gender discrimination, whereas the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire solicits information on discrimination in processes affecting both the respondents and other employees. This difference in reported scores on the two measures could be explained with the person/group discrimination discrepancy, coined by Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam and Lalonde (1990). They suggest that disadvantaged individuals often rate the discrimination suffered by their group (as measured by the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire) as more severe than the discrimination they suffer personally (as measured with the Fair Treatment at Work Survey). Dixon,

Durrheim, Tredoux, Tropp, Clack and Eaton (2010) also demonstrated this effect in a South African population sample while investigating perceptions of racial discrimination.

Remaining with the matter of no discrimination, using the Gender-Based Discrimination Questionnaire, more females than males (62.3% females; 60.3% males) perceived the appointment process to be free of discrimination. For promotional processes (61.6% females; 62.4% males), access to the training and development level (75.3% females; 76.3% males), and equal pay for equal work (73.3% female; 79.7% males), males more often view the processes as being free of discrimination. From the above, it is clear that most discrimination is perceived to occur at the appointment and promotional levels (the lowest report on no discrimination), with less discrimination when it comes to access to training and development and equal pay for equal work (high reports of no discrimination). The focus here should be on the relative large differences between the processes, rather than gender differences, which is rather small and not likely to be statistically significant.

### 7.3 Perceived gender-based discrimination

Females seem to experience discrimination, including gender discrimination, more frequently than males do. In total, 13.8% females reported gender-based discrimination in comparison with the 10.3% of males who reported it. However, this difference was not statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.914$ ;  $p = 0.027$ ). Two important matters relate to this.

Firstly, females do not experience more gender-based discrimination than males do, and, second, males experience a substantial amount of gender-based discrimination (1 in 10 males reported gender-based discrimination). It is important to note that the types of discrimination experienced by male and female employees are very similar ( $p = 0.890$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), being based on race, gender and age. Males and females thus do not experience different forms of discrimination, and the type and extent of discrimination are similar.

When it came to discrimination in the workplace, males and females listed similar outcomes ( $p = 0.894$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Both groups suggested that pay, perks and bonuses, as well as promotion, were negatively affected by discriminatory practices. These *workplace* results may appear to contradict the work done by Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowics and Owen (2002), who found that discrimination, had different implications for the *psychological well-being* of men and women.



In the matter of perceived gender-based discrimination, males reported pro-female discrimination (29.1%) at the appointment level more often than females reported about pro-male discrimination (22.3%). As far as promotions were concerned, males reported pro-female discrimination (27.9%) more frequently than females reported pro-male discrimination (24.9%).

Males and females reported similarly on discrimination at the access to training and development level. Males reported slightly more pro-female discrimination (16.8%) than females, who also reported pro-male discrimination (15.3%). As far as enforcing the principle of equal pay for equal work went, males reported less pro-female discrimination (11.6%) than females reported pro-male discrimination (22.9%). This all indicates that both males and females report discrimination and that the levels of reported discrimination are similar.

This is also evident from the average across items reported earlier. These results suggest that both gender groups display similar - in some cases almost equal - prejudice against the out-group. This pattern could be explained well by social identity theory, but even better as group-serving bias. The results from male and female responses, which mirror each other almost identically, are very similar to those found by Steyn (2012) for racial differences and by Hunter *et al.* (1991) for religious differences.

## **8. LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

The research had some limitations. One concern was that it reflects perceptions and may therefore reveal little of actual discrimination. This could be addressed by looking at hard data, which is certainly recommended. It was stated earlier, hard data could draw the attention to the objective situation, which could counter the (natural) development of perceptions of prejudice, which is not necessarily fact bound.

A further limitation is that the respondents were asked about the effects of discrimination in the workplace. The question thus did not direct their attention specifically to gender-based discrimination, but to discrimination in general. The results reported may thus be ambiguous. However, bearing in mind the general nature of the question, it should be noted that gender-based discrimination was most often mentioned by females, and constituted an important issue for males. Future researchers are cautioned against making the same mistake and should rather enquire directly about gender discrimination.

In conclusion, this research represents the views of general employees, not only senior managers. They represent a wide variety of organisations, including those in the government sector. Males and females both perceive themselves to be victims of gender-based discrimination, indicating that this is not an exclusively female experience. The workplace impact of perceived discrimination is very similar for males and females. Discrimination is perceived most at the appointment and promotion levels, and least at the training and development and equal pay for equal work levels. However, disagreement between males and females is the most significant when it comes to pro-male bias in equal pay for equal work.

## 9. CONCLUSION

This research focused on the experiences of discrimination against female and male employees in a comparable manner. There is a general tendency to focus on women's experiences of discrimination (Chabaya *et al.* 2009; Corning & Krengal 2002; Pavalko *et al.* 2003; Ro & Choi 2010), which is not the case with the groups studied in this article. Males were also sampled here, and they too experience gender-based discrimination. While the 13.8% of females reporting gender-based discrimination is unacceptable, the 10.3% reported by males is equally noteworthy.

Gender-based discrimination is thus experienced by females, but males also develop perceptions that they are the victims of discriminatory practices. It is possible that males develop such perceptions because the implementation of affirmative action (Republic of South Africa 1999) often places female employees in a position of advantage. Irrespective of the reasons for these perceptions, the fact that males feel aggrieved requires redress just as female perceptions must be considered.

The workplace impact of perceived discrimination is very similar for male and female employees, listing exactly the same effects.

The research conducted for this report tells the reader little about the actual levels of gender discrimination and additional research which could objectively determine such levels would be important, as unprejudiced information often alters negative perceptions (see Bendoly & Swink 2007; Zalesny & Ford 1990; Zhu, Xie & Gan 2011).

A change in negative perceptions is important as they influence employees at many levels. With reference to the concept of perceived as opposed to actual discrimination, it is interesting to note from this research that males and females are critical of each other, following group-serving bias and social identity theory. This is important to note, as these theories suggest prejudice based purely on group membership, irrespective of actual damage or advantage. This provides even more motivation for investigating the real levels of discrimination.

Managers, particularly human resources managers, should note that perceived gender-based discrimination occurs mostly at the appointment level (61.3%, indicating that there is no difference between males and females). The situation is very similar at the promotional level (62.0%), but when it came to access to training and development (75.8%) and equal pay for equal work (76.5%), more respondents felt that the playing fields were even.

Managers should therefore focus their attention on altering negative perceptions of what can be seen as unfairness in appointments and promotions, as this is where employees feel the most dissatisfied. Managers exposed to this data should also be motivated by these results to act more affirmatively and with higher levels of urgency as present measures does not redress the historic inequality of gender-based discrimination.

Managers should, however, note that although the male and female groups harbour similarly negative perceptions of each other, the difference is noticeable when it comes to pro-male bias regarding pay. As mentioned earlier, 22.9% of females reported pro-male bias in the case of equal pay for equal work, while the number was 8.8% for males. This suggests that more females than men perceive this pro-male bias in remuneration, so management could attempt to remedy this.

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