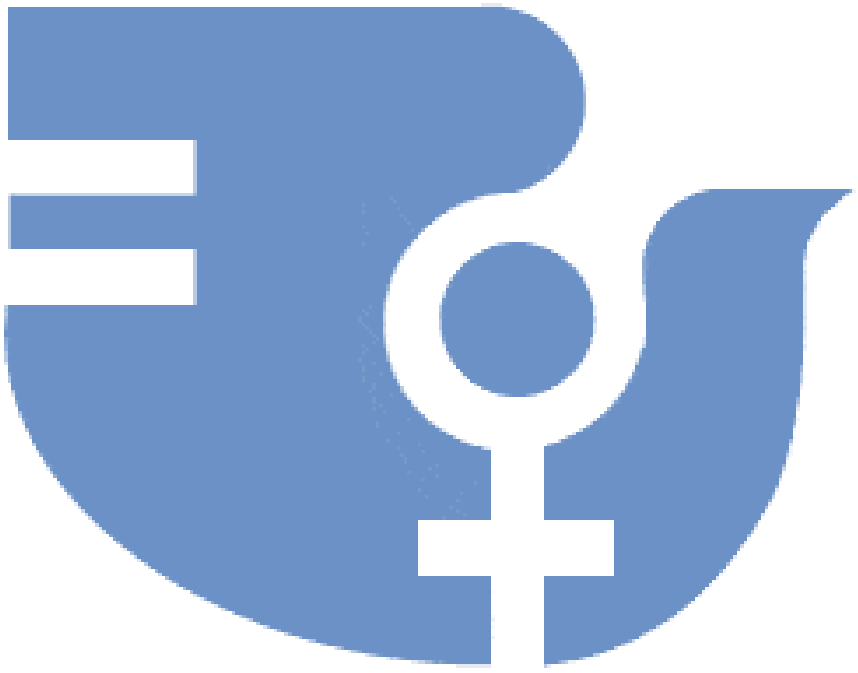
UNCSW TOPIC SYNOPSIS:

Challenging Gender-Based Inequalities and Norms in the Workforce



UN Commission on the Status of Women

I. Topic Background

Advancements have been made in legislation and awareness to gender-based inequalities in the workforce; however, women still face social barriers such as unequal pay, underrepresentation in higher positions, sexual harassment, and the ripples of patriarchal misogyny.

In the Western World, women would often take on the role of Home Maker, and would stay at home while their husbands financially supported the family. It was not until the late 1960s that women began to have control in their decision to have a career, and it was not until 1974 that women were able to open their own bank account.[1] The reaction to women joining the workforce was anxious and fearful, as men questioned women's capabilities, and believed that they would lose their jobs to a woman. People would eventually accept women as their coworkers; however, they would exploit them, as they would base salary off of gender, and sometimes would commit sexual misconduct.

The social and cultural norms that had been set continued to influence restrictions on women and their economic independence. According to The Organization For Economic Cooperation and Development, "The gender wage gap persists in every OECD country. Full-time working women earn, on average, only 88 cents to every dollar or euro earned by full-time working men."[2] Due to the expectation of women remaining as homemakers, they were restricted from getting access to education and other professional opportunities. These expectations were also reinforced throughout the world from cultural and religious traditions, one example being Confucianism. Confician traditions practiced strict teachings of women being very obedient and prioritizing their household. This led to men becoming decision makers and dominating paid employment. Even during labor shortage periods such as World War II, their participation was viewed as inferior. They were seen as temporary helpers, not deserving of respect. These beliefs have been so deeply ingrained into society that even in modern times there is still unequal treatment in the work force.

Despite many western societies having shown progression in terms of women's right to work over the years, the footprints of gender discrimination still linger throughout the economy today. As the major causes of the gendered wage-gap are analyzed, a leading factor behind the gap reveals an underlying issue–maternity leave. Women who experience childbirth face a setback in their careers, known as a "motherhood penalty," accounting for a large portion of the wage gap between men and women. The *Institute for Women's Policy Research* claims the "motherhood penalty" affects 80% of the wage gap between men and women, and that each child under five years old can reduce a woman's earnings by 15%.[3] According to the *American Sociological Association* (ASA), most common factors associated with the motherhood penalty included the assumption that mothers were: more likely to lose job experience, display less productivity at work, exchange their job for a more "mother-friendly" job, and even face discrimination from co-workers.[4] Mothers faced judgement for being "less committed to their

jobs, less dependable, less authoritative, more emotional, and more irrational than otherwise equal" as stated in the *Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School*.[5] On top of the perceived incompetence that women faced, the perpetual gap between mothers and men were exacerbated with the fact that men often-times received "fatherhood benefits" like salary increases by up to 3-10% and additional bonuses, thus contributing to the double standard.[6]

Cases of sexism within the workforce exist beyond just explicit discrimination, as the nuances of implicit biases also perpetuate throughout women's careers. The expectation for women to appear "presentatable" acts as an additional factor for women's success. There is a pressure placed on women to balance looking "professional" without it being a distraction, as it was "considered important to look good but without promoting attraction in any way," as mentioned in a study analyzed by the *National Library of Medicine*.[7] Women often feel obligated to follow strict grooming standards, such as wearing heels, make-up, dresses, and failure to abide by these standards resulted not only in reprimands, judgement, and mistreatment, but also loss of jobs and opportunities in some cases. Behavior norms in the workplace like these continue to persist, sparking protest like the #Kutoo Movement in Japan, and call to action such as the implementation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which included prohibiting discrimination against sex, pregnancy, sexual orientation, and other gender identity.[8]

Case Study 1: Paid Leave/The Motherhood Penalty in the West

The Motherhood Penalty is the disadvantage a woman has regarding her career if she has a child. She risks losing her wage or risks losing opportunities, such as a promotion, all because she took time off in order to take care of her child. Mothers could be perceived as being not as dedicated to their job as men, or childfree women, even when their performance postpartum remains unchanged. Men are said to not receive the same treatment, and if they choose to take time off as well, their performance at work is judged as being the same as before they took their leave. This treatment reflects unfair societal expectations placed upon women in the workforce.

Being a woman in the workforce already comes with difficulties, even if a woman is a mother or childfree. In the majority of developed countries, women are paid less than men, and depending on the country, that could be from a nine cent difference or a 35 cent difference.[9] According to Anne-Marie Slaughter, "In Poland, women earn 91 cents for every dollar a man does."[10] Poland is considered to be a progressive country; however, they still statistically pay women less than men. In South Korea, women earn 65 cents to a dollar, meaning that women have to work more just to be paid the same amount as men.[9] If a woman becomes a mother, then the likelihood of her pay gap decreasing further. According to authors Goldin, Kerr, and Olvetti, approximately "15 years after college, mothers earn 42 percent less than fathers."[10]

The United States is the only developed nation to not guarantee a paid maternity leave on the federal level. If someone is unpaid for a long period of time, then they risk losing basic necessities, and might go into financial hardship. A mother would have to account for herself, and her child; therefore, needing more money than before to function. However, if you are not guaranteed payment, then you will not be able to afford those essential items.

Mothers in the workforce can be viewed in a negative light, as some coworkers may have some presupposed idea of them. According to the Gender Action Portal at Harvard, "Some studies show that visibly pregnant women are judged as being less committed to their jobs, less dependable, less authoritative, more emotional, and more irrational than otherwise equal, non-pregnant female managers."[11] If someone views a person as being "less committed" to their career, then the person will be taken far less seriously; therefore, leading to lessened chances and benefits.

The UN has recognized this problem, and motion to help resolve this judgement. An early case of this was in 1978 when the UN established the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978.[12] The act declares "To amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit sex discrimination on the basis of pregnancy."[12] The UN has also founded the Commission on the Status of Women body, which according to the CSW, focuses on "exclusively… the promotion of gender equality, the rights and empowerment of women."[13]

In developing countries, such as Nauru, the pay gap between men and women is worsened; there is no guarantee on a paid maternity leave. While paid maternity leave is not federally guaranteed in a country such as the United States, the country's economic capacity means it has significantly greater flexibility to be able to offer this privilege. This is not the case in developing countries that face severe financial constraints; therefore, further dividing the equality between genders in the workforce.

The Motherhood Penalty continues to reflect on rooted gender biases that puts a disadvantage on mothers. Unequal pay, lack of guaranteed maternity leave, and negative workplace perceptions combine to create creative barriers for women in the work force. Addressing these inequalities through policy changes and new acts could help further the equality, and end gender biased biases.

Case Study 2: The KuToo Movement in Japan (Current)

Gender based discrimination in the workforce remains a global issue, specifically prejudice that is deeply rooted in cultural norms. In Japan, these heavily ingrained expectations have not only marginalized their professional opportunities, but have also placed them a physical disadvantage. One example is the expectation for women to wear high heels in professional settings. Not only does this cause physical harm and can impact their job performance, it further normalizes gender inequality. The KuToo movement which started in 2019 protested against this expectation by advocating for women's rights and the control over their own body. This case examines how the KuToo movement developed, the societal and governmental response it receives and how it has shaped gender equality in professional environments.[8]

The KuToo movement arose to respond to the long standing gender norm where women are held to much stricter standards in appearance compared to men in Japanese corporate culture. The word "KuToo" combines the Japanese words *kutsu* (shoes) and *kutsu* (pain), symbolizing the physical harm that was endured due to the mandatory high heel policies.[8] The movement gained national attention when actress and writer Yuri Ishikawa initiated an online petition advocating

for this policy to be removed. She argued that these policies were harmful, discriminatory and unnecessary, especially for women who have to stand and work long hours.

Despite the extensive support she gained, with thousands of petition signatures, the Japanese government initially resisted the movement and the demand to remove this policy. The Japanese Prime Minister of Health stated that he believes not wearing heels was "inappropriate" and said that they are "necessary and reasonable" for workplace professionalism.[8] This response highlighted the disconnect between the perspectives of working women and male dominated values. To respond, advocates argued that their comfort and ability to perform well is a bigger priority than women's appearances.

The Kutoo movement sparked widespread conversations about gender equality in Japan, a country that is consistent in poor performance in gender equality. The mandatory dress codes lead to the discussion about deeper systematic issues such as leadership, wage disparities, and social pressure for women to be confined to traditional roles. Although the movement didn't immediately cause a revolutionary shift in culture, there has been a big increase in public awareness and empowered women speaking out against discriminatory workplace policies. Several companies have altered their dress code policies and cultural norms have been shifted gradually.

The incremental progress from the KuToo movement has challenged deeply rooted gender norms in Japan's workforce and highlights how advocacy and activism can stand against discrimination at a patriarchal level. It has reframed gender based policies and has spread awareness on human rights issues. This movement is a strong example of resistance and how powerful it can be against discrimination.

II. Past UN Involvement

- Specialized bodies of the United Nations such as the Commission on the Status of Women and International Labor Organization set global standards for equality and monitor progress through annual sessions.
    - The UN works to eliminate inequality and discrimination in the workplace and considers gender equality to be a human right. Existing frameworks push member states to adopt inclusive and fair labor policies.

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly.[13]
    - Article 11 of CEDAW affirms the right for women to work as "inalienable right of all human beings" and demands "the right to equal remuneration, including benefits, and to equal treatments in respect of work of value."[13]

  - CEDAW urges governments to protect women from harassment and exploitation and holds them accountable through required progress reports. The UN is able to have influence against these longstanding gender norms.
  - As of 2025, 189 countries have ratified the convention.

- Advocacy through committees such as UN Women and CSW helps to improve gender equality as they are able to address the gender pay gap, workplace harassment, and raise awareness for representation of women in leadership.
  - Annual CSW meetings and publication of global reports benefits the UN on progress analysis and data exchanges—all to encourage coordinated methods and share the best practices among member states.

- The Sustainable Development Goal (Goal 5) advocates for gender equality.[14]
  - Calls for "women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making."[14]
  - The UN emphasizes that eliminating gender discrimination is crucial for long term economic sustainability.
  - The UN provides governments who aid this cause with technological assistance and policy recommendations to align with labor laws, further influencing legislation that supports equal pay and anti discrimination.
  - Through these protocols, the UN continues to challenge workplace norms and promotes progressive change on a global scale.

- Goals 5 and 9 of the United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development state the establishment of the *Equal Pay and International Coalition* (EPIC) with the intention of guaranteeing equal pay of equal value for women and men of all countries and sectors by 2030.[16]
  - Their goals include fulfilling the objectives of equality ratified under the Equal Remuneration Convention of the International Labour Organizations (ILO).
  - As a collaborative effort between the ILO, UN Women, and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, EPIC serves as an organization and ongoing movement for gender equality throughout the workforce.

- To continue building commitment on promoting gender equality as a fundamental right, the UN emphasizes equal access to employment.
  - Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Global Compact highlight fair treatment and eliminating discrimination being an essential aspect to achieving global equality.

III. Bloc Positions

North American Bloc

The U.S. has taken progressive measures to combat workplace inequality over time, but wage gaps and systemic inequalities still exist at large. Laws such as the Equal Pay Act implemented in 1963 prohibited discrimination between male and female coworkers performing at equivalent skill levels, efforts, and responsibilities in the same working environment. Despite this law setting the base-line for equality in the workplace in terms of salary, most common career-infringing obstacles for women, such as birthgiving and childcare, were still unaccounted for. In 1993, the Family and Medical Leave Act was passed, permitting a 12-week job-protected unpaid maternity leave in a 12-month period. Although this was a federally mandated law, it didn't account for women who worked in smaller or private companies with fewer than 50 employees, or those who haven't worked at least 1,760 hours within the past 12-months prior to the leave. FMLA served more as job protection, rather than actually prioritizing the needs of working women taking the leave. As a result, the FMLA law inadvertently excluded many low-income, small-business owning, and newly employed working women. It also disproportionately excluded Latino and African American or low income women, as a survey of 2000 demonstrated that younger, unmarried, and low-income women were less likely to receive benefits from FMLA. (*National Library of Medicine*) As of 2020, the Federal Employee Paid Leave Act (FEPLA) has been implemented, making changes to FMLA by adapting to a paid 12-week leave rather than an unpaid one. Though, the difference is that FEPLA is only exclusive to federal employees, and aren't mutually exclusive to the remainder of U.S. employees who must still rely on their qualifications for FMLA or benefits at the state level.

Meanwhile, Canada has illustrated more proactivity in regards to initiating gender equality in the workforce. The Pay Equity Act serves as a mandated system that routinely checks and regulates the wage gap in a company or workforce. Employees analyze their work environment by determining the distribution of female and male employees, the value of work from each gender, and then calculating and comparing the compensation necessary to ensure equal pay. Every 5 years, the plan is revised and updated to guarantee a close in the pay gap. Compared to the United States, Canada recognizes women's rights as a human right, and has proven to take steps towards preventative measures against gender-based discrimination in the workplace, rather than simply focusing on legal cases, labor issues, or complaints from employees themselves.[15]

Eastern European Bloc

The European Commission has established various initiatives to directly combat gender inequalities in the workforce, including: Pay Transparency Directive, Work-Life Balance Directive, and the European Equal Pay Day. The Pay Transparency Directive authorizes employers to disclose salary information prior to hiring employees, as well giving employees the

right to inquire about salary in regards to work of equal value at any time throughout their career. Under the Work-Life Balance Directive, each parent is entitled to parental leave, not just mothers.[16] This act recognizes and grants paternity leave to fathers, essentially enabling parents to the benefits and expectations of balancing work and familial care. Additionally, although an Equal Pay Day persists internationally, The European Union has incorporated their own Equal Pay Day, a day that changes each year depending on calculations done leading to the disparity in the wage gap. However, the laws and acts that have brought to attention the issue regarding discrimination in the workforce are not consistent throughout Europe, and as the division of gender equality in the workforce still remains divided between Nordic countries and the rest of Europe.

Northern European Bloc

Northern Europe, specifically most of the Nordic countries in Scandinavia, have statistically proven to have the highest rates of gender equality in and outside of the workforce. One of the leading factors determining the high ranks of women's rights fall within highly improved childcare policies, allowing more women to smoothly transition into the workforce without the concern of motherhood taking over their careers. Sweden upholds the standard for "the most generous parental leave policy in the world, with parents entitled to share 480 days" of paid parental leave, along with Norway, giving "14 weeks employment leave following the birth of a child."[17] Sweden, Norway, and Finland have also seen an increase in female legislators within parliament, largely due to female empowerment movements in the 1970s and progressive actions taken to assimilate women into legislation. Sweden illustrates this change, as "the number of Swedish women equalled males in ministerial positions for the first time" since 2016. As per other regions of Europe, such as the Balkan countries, women's rights in the workforce have had fewer advantages primarily due to the traditional and cultural norms that have continued to persist. According to the *European Institute for Gender Equality*, women hold 35% of managerial positions, whereas their male counterparts account for 65%, as of 2024. Men also make up 81% of ICT specialist jobs notable for higher pay, compared to women who only account for around 20%.[18] Overall, Europe's advancements towards gender equality have improved significantly towards certain parts of the country, yet remain subtle in other regions.

Sub-Saharan African Bloc

Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have traditionally been ranked as one of the lowest for women's rights within the workforce. Outside of the corporate sector, countries in Southern Africa have already been trying to tackle the gender-based violence that puts women that directly and physically disenfranchises, oppresses, and persecutes women on an entire basis. Thus, the ability for women to present themselves in the work force has already been severely undermined. Traditional gender roles also permeate throughout these regions, essentially prohibiting the chance for women to even enter the labor force. Given the case that women are present in the

work environment, they are typically employed under informal professions such as agriculture, as it plays a major role in these countries' socioeconomic systems. The *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations* reports that "approximately three out of four working women…are employed in agrifood systems, and women make up 49% of the agrifood systems workforce." However, despite the amount of labor that women contribute on the field, they are not fairly compensated for their efforts, and oftentimes still face job instability, health risks, and lack of access to their own farmed resources. Women make up most of the population for labor on land, and yet "men are more likely than women to own land or hold secure land rights."[19] In addition to the ongoing poverty, systemic legal and cultural barriers, along with gender-based segregation in and outside of the workforce, much action is still required to reach gender parity in Sub-Saharan Africa.

IV. Possible Solutions

In order to challenge gender-based inequalities in the workforce, the barriers that limit equality must be removed. Member states should expand access to leadership opportunities in order to allow women to have a voice, and allow for balanced representation in decisions being made. In addition, governments and organizations can promote equality by encouraging transparent promotion processes, and support workplace environments that value diverse perspectives.

Creating a safe work environment is also essential to ensuring a safe and productive working environment for all employees. Legal frameworks that discourage and established safe measures against sexual harassment or misconduct could be strengthened. Alongside legal protections, education on sexual harassment in the workplace could be advanced, as this would reduce stigma, and bring awareness to the topic. If under these measures one were to face harassment, they would be taken seriously, and action would be taken in order to ensure their safety.

A guaranteed paid maternity leave in all countries would help to promote equality, and also strengthen economic stability. Standard maternity and parental leave policies should be adopted; they would align with the labor laws in the particular country, and ensure that women would not face any damage in their career or missed opportunities if they choose to take this time off.

V. Questions to Consider

1. How do deeply ingrained cultural norms and gender expectations reinforce unequal treatment and opportunity in professional environments across different regions?
2. In what ways do discriminatory workplace practices, such as unequal pay and restrictive dress codes, undermine women's ability to perform their professional duties effectively?

3. How does the underrepresentation of women in leadership and decision-making roles perpetuate systemic gender inequality within the workforce?
4. What role does workplace harassment and gender-based violence play in limiting women's economic participation and professional advancement?
5. How can international frameworks, such as those established by the United Nations, influence national labor policies to challenge discriminatory gender norms?
6. To what extent do informal workplace expectations contribute to gender-based discrimination beyond formal legislation?
   How does economic inequality in the workforce, including wage gaps and job segregation, impact broader social and economic development?
7. How do national laws regarding equal pay vary between developed and developing countries?
8. What negative emotional consequences do women risk experiencing after being subjected to workplace harassment?

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