

Kwentong Kasarian ng Kababaihang Kawani: Experiences of Philippine Public Sector Women Employees Facing and Coping with Workplace Gender Discrimination

Clarisse Mae N. Abao

ABSTRACT

Gender workplace discrimination continues to be alarming despite the institutionalization of anti-discrimination policies, guidelines, and principles accounting for various social differences at the international, national, and even organizational levels. One of the common policies is the merit system which is commonly employed during the hiring and promotion of individuals in government institutions. Drawing from the narrative inquiry, this study explores the stories of women from selected public sector organizations in the Philippines and how they perceive and experience gender discrimination in the workplace, particularly in hiring, promotion, and delegation of assignments. By capturing their perspectives, the researcher analyzed the different forms of workplace gender discrimination experienced by women in the public sector as well as their coping mechanisms which reflect how this problem is seen in the context of the public sector employment setting.

Keywords: gender discrimination, workplace discrimination, public sector, Philippines, photo-elicitation, auto-photography

In 2019, after almost a year of working at a national research and development (R&D) government agency, I was reassigned to a new unit within the same organization to work as an executive assistant—a position I did not apply for, but an opportunity I took for a possible pay increase. When I asked about the responsibilities and functions the post required before I took over, I was told, “You will write, take photos, and do errands for Sir [boss]. If he has official travels, wait for his arrival. Ensure that the room he’ll stay in has food, water, and has strong water pressure and clean beddings.”¹ I embraced these tasks enthusiastically but soon observed a gender disparity: Male managers led technical divisions involving leadership and specialized tasks, while female managers led administrative units with comparable qualifications but fewer opportunities for technical roles. The agency's director, a male third-level official, oversaw the meetings.

Employment in government usually adheres to the merit principle, where hiring and promotion are based on individual ability and fit, evaluated through competitive exams and criteria rewarding excellence (Legal Information Institute, n.d.; Ali et al., 2017). In the Philippines, civil service recruitment follows this merit system, overseen by the Civil Service Commission (CSC), which enforces policies for effective personnel administration (Legal Information Institute, n.d.; Quah, 2016).

One of the principles employed by CSC is the Equal Employment Opportunity Principle which states that:

Agencies are also encouraged to adopt Equal Employment Opportunity Principle guidelines to remove barriers and discrimination during the selection process or in participating in or accessing learning and development interventions on the basis of

¹ To make this article concise, all the quoted narratives, which were mentioned in Filipino or a mix of Filipino and English from the research participants starting from this point to the end of the article were translated to English.

sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE), civil status, disability, religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation...” (CSC, 2022, para. 7)

The Philippine Development Plan 2023-2028 has also created a roadmap to increase women’s participation in the labor force by “providing economic opportunities and addressing the gender bias and gender stereotypes associated with women” (NEDA, 2023, para. 14).

Despite the international and local principles and systems available to ensure fairness and just employment, particularly in the government setting, the merit system has limited scope when specific factors come into play such as age, race, disability, and gender. There is implicit discrimination and occupational inequality when a certain individual or group is denied equal treatment due to their social difference, which impairs their “opportunity or treatment in employment or occupation” (International Labour Office, 2021, p. 42).

Women are among the disadvantaged groups in the workplace due to the recognized challenges of patriarchy since organizations are traditionally designed for men to succeed in riding in “glass escalators” (Stainback et al., 2011, p. 1181) while women continuously face “glass ceilings” (India Today, 2020; Stainback et al., 2011).

The Philippines stands out for its impressive labor force participation, approaching 50% across various sectors including academia, politics, and law (Li, 2022; Santiago, 2008). According to Tabuga & Cabaero (2019), there are 15 million formally employed women, with over 1 million working in government roles. Notably, women constitute 61.55% of the career service across the country (CSC, 2019). Despite holding more second-level positions in the public sector compared to men, women are still significantly underrepresented in higher-level roles like directors and cabinet positions (CSC, 2019). The country continues to face challenges in offering women the opportunity to advance in “traditional centers of power” (Li, 2022, p. 36).

Gender discrimination arises when stereotypes overshadow women's qualifications and abilities (Gregory, 2003; Heilman & Caleo, 2015). In the Philippines, discrimination includes gender stereotyping, pay gaps in male-dominated fields, and poor working conditions in the informal sector (NEDA, 2023).

Workplace gender inequality manifests in organizational structures, processes, and practices (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Britton and Logan (2008) observed that jobs are inherently gendered, with women often occupying "nurturing and supportive" roles that mirror their traditional domestic responsibilities (Britton & Logan, 2008, p. 108). These gender stereotypes restrict women from roles associated with rationality and authority, typically reserved for men (Young & Hurlic, 2007). This leads to both horizontal and vertical segregation within organizations, perpetuated by both individual biases and the gendered nature of organizational culture and structure (Britton & Logan, 2008).

Notably, the Philippines has a long history of advocating for gender equality in the workplace as operationalized by the Magna Carta of Women. In the public sector, the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) through its Memorandum Circular No. 2011-01 has institutionalized the creation and strengthening of the Gender and Development Focal Point System (GFPS) per government institution (PCW, 2022). The GFPS is one of the efforts of the PCW to mainstream gender in the workplace, particularly in the public sector (PCW, 2022). However, since not all GFPS of government agencies are functional, the PCW continues to monitor the system devise tools to ensure the objective of establishing GFPS will be realized by each government agency in the Philippines (PCW, 2022).

Institutional measures like the merit principle do not fully capture the realities faced by women in the workplace. Gender roles, stereotypes, and biases, whether conscious or unconscious, contribute significantly to maintaining gender inequality. The same goes with

the institutionalized groups, which may not be functional despite the tools and policies in place for monitoring and implementation. Addressing these issues requires examining women's actual experiences and their capacities at the micro-level rather than relying solely on institutional mechanisms to work.

Despite the apparent gendered assignments and discrimination, there have been few efforts to explore and address these issues, especially within the organizational context of Philippine government agencies.

Exploring Gender Workplace Discrimination in the Philippine Public Sector

“How do women experience workplace discrimination?” This article aims to answer the question by looking into the experiences of women working at a national government agency. Specifically, this article will examine the perception and narratives of these women. Using their narratives, this article aims to shed light on the institutional and social factors that women face in the public sector. This includes the effects they experience from such discrimination, as well as their efforts to overcome their struggles. Finally, this study also intends to provide key recommendations to help address gender-based discrimination in the public sector.

Guided by the narrative approach of inquiry, I looked at how women “highlight [their] versions of self and reality...produced through storytelling” (Chase, 2005, p. 67). Highlighting the participant’s agency and experience through their stories is an approach that enables me to investigate the richness and complexity of capturing the participant’s experience of the world (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The narrative approach used in this study was conducted in phases. The study began with participant observation where I, the researcher, observed the routines, activities, and experiences of the women under study. Berg (2001, p. 117) claimed that this method is useful in interrogating “organizations and organizational structures [and] social roles among group

members.” Implicit and explicit organizational gender discrimination can be more visibly and critically examined through this method.

Participant observation was followed by photo-elicitation and auto-photography where participants “identify, document, and represent their community’s strengths and concerns from their perspective through a photographic technique” (Wang, 1999, as cited in Sutton-Brown, 2014, p. 169). Designed to serve as a pre-activity before the narrative storytelling, auto-photography entailed the participants in taking and/or providing photographs that best represent who they are and how they see themselves at work. The photos may include a person or set of people, a thing, a place, an event, or a symbol that they value in the workplace. Short descriptions were asked from the participants based on the meanings they associated with each photo. Finally, photo-elicitation and auto-photography was followed by narrative storytelling. This facilitated research participants to identify meanings and elicit reflections. The stories contain the narrative as elicited by the photos taken, which make room for critical dialogue and promote openness in participant-initiated sharing (Sutton-Brown, 2014). When people tell their stories, their selves, experiences, and realities are shaped, constructed, and performed (Bell, 2002).

During the data collection from November 2022 to May 2023, the employees were identified through non-probability purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (a) a current female employee of the selected government agency at the time of the study, (b) a middle manager or rank-and-file employee who has experienced or undergone the formal process of hiring and promotion, (c) has equal to or more than one year of service in the selected government agency, (d) may or may not have experienced working in other government agencies prior to the current agency they are employed at the time of the study, (e) willing to share experience and stories regarding hiring, promotion, task assignments which may be subjected to gender workplace discrimination, and (f) consents to participate

in the research. Guided by cross-sectional analysis, the narratives were gathered through interviews and analyzed into common themes.

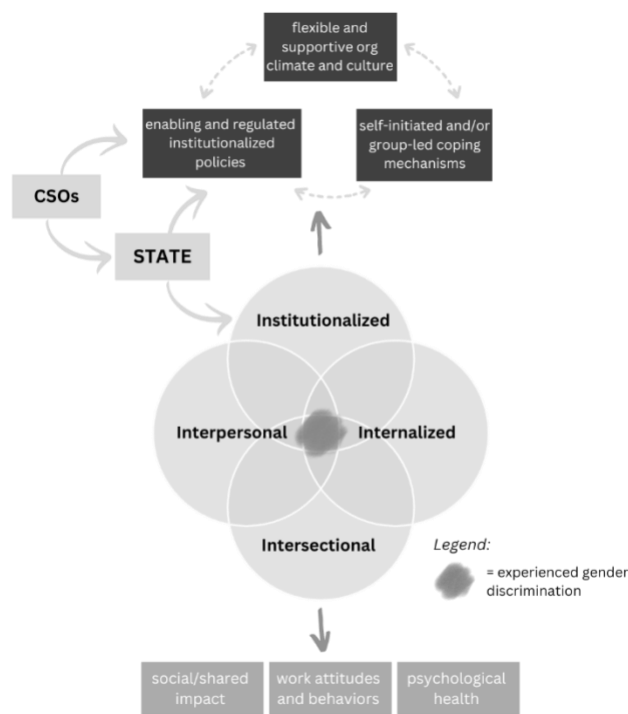
The next sections will present the framework of the study, summarizing the relationship between and among the different forms of gender-based workplace discrimination, the actors that were in play, and the hindrances and enabling mechanisms based on the context of this study. This will be followed by the results of the empirical and analytical examination of the participants' narratives from how they chose and took the photos that best represented their work, the descriptions that they associated with these photos, and the implicit and explicit forms of gender discrimination embedded in their experiences in the workplace.

Coping mechanisms of the participants' experienced gender-based workplace discrimination will also be discussed. Considering the limitations of the employees' coping mechanisms, the researcher presented the different forms of discrimination that were observed to be present in the narratives. Recognizing that there are different forms of discrimination apart from the individualized form may also give opportunity to uncover the hidden dynamics and to devise ways on how to possibly address the overall gender-based workplace discrimination experienced by women in the public sector.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



This framework highlights the intersection of organizational-led and perceived gender discrimination experienced by women. Organizational-led discrimination is rooted in institutional structures, while perceived discrimination stems from personal socialization outside the workplace. Together, they shape women's overall experience of gender discrimination. The impacts of this discrimination are multifaceted, affecting physical and psychological health, work attitudes, behaviors, and social dynamics. Notably, the social and shared impact extends beyond the individual to their immediate networks. These interconnected outcomes highlight the broad-reaching consequences of gender discrimination in the workplace.

The framework in Figure 1 also identifies strategies to mitigate gender discrimination, including (a) self-initiated or group-led coping mechanisms, (b) supportive organizational cultures, and (c) institutionalized policies. These approaches can function independently or together, offering multiple pathways to address discrimination.

The state's influence is twofold: it can perpetuate gender discrimination through rigid institutional policies, or conversely, help minimize it by promoting supportive policies. Formalization, while potentially reinforcing discriminatory practices, can also be a tool for positive change. Civil society organizations play a critical role in pressuring the state to enact policies that reduce workplace discrimination, fostering an environment where women can thrive.

This framework underscores the complex interplay between individual, organizational, and state-level factors in shaping women's experiences of workplace discrimination, while also offering pathways for addressing these challenges.

From Stories to Realizations to Coping Mechanisms

This section presents the narratives of five women working in the public sector. Their narratives include workplace stories and their perceptions of their roles, learning and development, promotion, and work assignments in the workplace. Besides workplace narratives, this section also shows how gender-based workplace discrimination is perceived by women, how they think it affects others (women), and how gender-based discrimination intersects with other forms of discrimination. We begin with the story of Laila.

The Story of Laila, the one who Described Herself as an “Executive Alalay”

Laila, a middle manager, has been working for almost 20 years in her current organization. Before joining her current workplace, she started as an executive assistant at an

international firm where she labeled her role as an EA (normally shortened abbreviation of an Executive Assistant), but she meant “Executive *Alalay* [Assistant]”.

In 2005, seeking tenure and a job aligned with her technical expertise, she joined the public sector through one of the organization’s technical divisions. Yet when she was hired, she initially performed functions as a technical assistant to the deputy director wherein she fulfilled both technical and administrative duties. Eventually, she transitioned full-time to a technical division, allowing her to fully engage in her area of technical expertise. When asked about why she still performed technical tasks that are not part of her terms as an assistant despite being overloaded with her administrative duties, she said, “It is just that I am enjoying the technical part of my work.”

In 2013, acknowledging her abilities, she became the director's executive assistant, relinquishing her role in the technical division she was previously assigned. However, in 2015, she was permanently appointed as an information officer, a role reflective of her duties as an executive assistant doing administrative work rather than her technical expertise.

Figure 2

Laila and project proponents in fieldwork



Note. Laila shared this photo as her memory of her pride at work as a technical focal person and project coordinator.

After her stint in 2017, Laila was assigned to lead the administrative and finance division. Despite her specialization and joy in performing as a technical focal person, she was told that her assignment to lead the division was because she earned the trust of the former director. Laila shared, “The director was looking for someone trustworthy to handle the administrative division, and he deemed that I am the only one fit for the job.”

In her eagerness to still perform technical work, she juggled both technical and administrative functions. “I am multitasking as an administrative division chief and a technical focal person. Since I am enjoying the technical work that I do, handling administrative functions was difficult for me. I cannot balance both functions.”

At the time of the study, Laila was reassigned to the division where she currently functions based on her *plantilla*² as an information officer.

The Story of Claire, the one who Perceived Herself as a Loser who Thrived

After graduating from college, Claire decided to look for job opportunities in the public sector inspired by some members of her family who are also public servants. This decision was further rooted in the desire to give back as imparted by her experience and beliefs from the state university she graduated from, “We are scholars of the people; I need to return the service for the people.”

Among all her colleagues, Claire was only one of the few who did not have any connections affiliated with the organization upon being hired. She believed that she was able to enter the organization on merit. While this seems to be a smooth sailing journey, her experience said otherwise. “A loser is someone like me. I do not have connections with the organization. You will not be noticed and appreciated if you are not involved or connected with any of the employees here.”

For five years, Claire worked as a contract of service (COS) employee. On top of her experienced discrimination because of her lack of connections, she also shared the limitations imposed by her employment status.

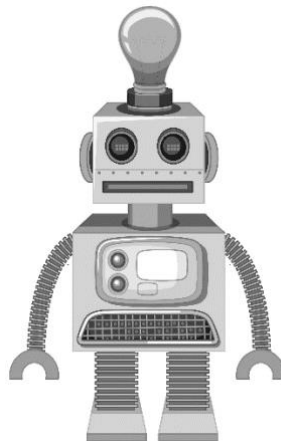
If you become a permanent employee, you seem to become untouchable... You have the right to say no to tasks, as you will not be expelled at work that easily. The permanent employees in our team are the ones who are perverse. We, COS employees, cover all the work, but when we complain, we are perceived as bad employees.

² Plantilla refers to a tenured or a regular status of employment (e.g., permanent, contractual, coterminous, etc.). Permanent is a type of a plantilla status or position.

When asked how she dealt with her unpleasant experience, she initiated to capacitate herself to upskill in the related areas that may contribute to her work. “I looked for other things to do, hence I entered a master’s program and graduate school because when I express my opinion on meetings and they know that I am studying, I feel that my insights are valid.”

Figure 3

A photo of a robot chosen by Claire



Note. Claire shared a photo of a robot when asked how she sees her role in the organization. As she explained, the robot is like her functioning in an automatic manner trying to deliver all the tasks even beyond her salary grade and terms of reference as if she cannot be tired or else the deliverables will be compromised. From Vectors

(<https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/4341980-vintage-robot-toy-on-white-background>)

Apart from her technical functions, she was also one of the Gender and Development (GAD) focal persons of the organization. She shared that she learned and unlearned new concepts that she was also able to apply at home.

I learned a lot. Religion has a large influence on our family because the church teaches us that it is the Father and men who should be obeyed in everything, while women

should be submissive. So, when I became a GAD focal person, I learned that there are also tasks that I can do more than what I was taught.

Claire had worked diligently as a technical staff and was able to land a permanent plantilla position in her five years of stay in the organization. Now working for almost a decade, she was given an additional assignment to serve as the youngest assistant chief on one of the technical units in the organization. Despite being assigned to a supervisory role, she is working concurrently on her technical functions. The assignments piled up, but her salary grade was still the same.

She shared that whenever the unit she was recently assigned to hoped for a positive outcome of a request, she was asked by her supervisor, a female employee, to lobby the request to the management on behalf of the unit as this was perceived to yield positive results. “According to my supervisor, the director listens more to me because he listens more to a person who’s attractive even if he doesn’t agree to what that person is reporting for approval.”

Claire shared those gendered roles and expectations are persistent in the organization as seen in their kind of work.

If there is an event, men comprise the exhibit committee in charge of carrying heavy stuff and the transportation committee because this demands physical strength.

Women can also be part of the transportation committee, but they are expected to be tough.

The Story of Paula, the one who Dreams of Being Known by Name.

Paula was in her sixth year at the organization. She was a COS employee for five years until she was promoted to a permanent position. Like Claire, she was one of the organization’s youngest permanent plantilla employees.

As she just recently underwent the hiring process, she shared her experience. “They follow rubrics and merit systems in place and consider the character of the staff and the supervisors’ assessment as well, which are deemed important in hiring.”

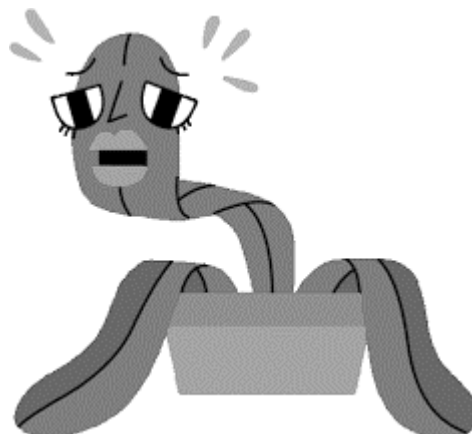
Paula shared her experience about hiring and promotion. As she observed, the selection and promotion board value the candidates' character, which was based on the board's preconceived notions and beliefs. These beliefs, as she claimed, factor gender stereotypes and gendered roles especially in associating the candidate with assignments based on their sex. Paula explained,

Right now, the management is mostly men, but their assistants are women. Our male leaders’ right-hands are females. It is about a worldview that men are leaders and women are the best supporters. In the organization, [gendered roles] is not that loudly discussed, but it still exists.

Paula added that not everyone can lead, some are good followers. She believed that there was minimal to no discrimination taking place if women, despite the majority being in assistant positions, were happy and content in their positions by choice.

Figure 4

A photo of a plant chosen by Paula



Note. Paula compared herself to a plant—sometimes in its full freshness, sometimes dry, sometimes tired. A plant, as she described, is what she is at work. She also mentioned that she, as a plant, is also subjected to different kinds of pests and diseases which makes her more resilient and thrive in the organization despite the challenges. (<https://tenor.com/view/flora-friends-plant-exhausted-tired-dying-gif-14462219>)

In terms of task assignments, Paula also shared her observations that occurred in the division she was assigned in:

Women are more likely to accept unwanted tasks than men. When men do tasks that are not aligned with their expertise, they are not able to perform the tasks well. The supervisors are more lenient to men compared to women. When women fail on their unwanted tasks, they are treated more negatively as compared to the men who fail.

Paula also added: “Women find it more difficult to decline tasks compared to males because we are softer emotionally than males.”

It was Paula’s first time applying for a permanent plantilla position, and she said she earned the position. When asked about her motivation to apply, she shared:

When I became a permanent staff member, I am more confident in my insights. In terms of authority, I am more believable, though sometimes I find it difficult when I am the youngest in a meeting with male project proponents and experts because they do not consider my insights valid. I feel disrespected and sometimes invalidated.

When asked about her dream as a female employee, she sounded fully empowered:

I dream of being a name, that even if they still have not seen me, met me, or seen my photo, they will already know me. I want my name to stand alone as I am [Paula]; and that I can deliver my tasks and my job.

The Story of Vilma, the one who Wants to Rise to be Visible

Vilma specialized in her current technical function which she has practiced in the organization for more than a decade. Among the almost 150 employees in the organization, she is one of those with the most advanced educational background.

Figure 5

Photo of Orchids



Note. Vilma shared a photo of orchids shined by the sunlight. She said this signifies her hope and positivity that there are always learnings and light that come in every challenge at work and in life. (<https://www.pinterest.ph/pin/665758757397712150>)

Despite her seasoned experience and exceptional competencies, she remained as a technical unit chief with a salary grade equivalent to only that of a section chief supervised by a division chief. She had numerous attempts to apply for a promotion for a division chief considering her capacities and eligibility, but she failed in her application to be promoted in the organization.

During the time of this study, a new opportunity opened for a vacancy with a higher salary grade compared to her current one. Since some employees perceive that there is a preferred individual for the position, only a few expressed their intent to apply.

Vilma's colleague at one lunch meeting shared her insights regarding the job post: "If that was me, why would I even bother to tire myself in the process when the decision is already decided? Even if the other applicant lacks qualifications, he or she will still be chosen by the management."

Vilma shared that despite this, she continued aspiring to rise in the ranks of the organization to increase the visibility and authority of the unit she currently manages. "I am really looking at an organization hoping that there is an equal footing for units. [Since 2021], I have not intended to apply for a job in another organization except for that division chief post."

While recognizing her eligibility to apply, she also shared that she took back her chance. "I would rather not apply for the job. I will not be chosen despite being eligible; I will no longer apply."

Apart from hiring and promotion, Vilma also shared that she was offered to be detailed³ as a division chief at the central office. Though this may look promising, she will still be paid based on her current salary grade.

Adamant to take this opportunity as she wants to stay at the organization, the Director who was just recently reinstated as the agency head after his plantilla item was on hold for a while, told her, "You cannot decline that because I will be in danger and you as well. You

³ Detailing pertains to assigning individuals on another role to a higher or attached agency of the organization where they originally report to but are still compensated based on their original plantilla position from their original agency.

know that I just recently got back [to my position]. I hope you understand.” Vilma quoted the Director in a non-verbatim manner.

Vilma expressed how she felt after her conversation with the Director:

I want to excel here. It is hard for me to accept the decision and the reality of life, but I think that is the bitter pill that all of us here need to swallow. It is the reality of the office, yet I will still try and accept it, as I have no choice.

She also shared an instance wherein she felt confused why her suggestion was declined despite it being positively regarded by her other colleagues and was deemed valid. She added that because of the stereotypes that the director has about her, her ideas, no matter how good and valid, will not be regarded. She shared, “Is it my idea being contradicted because it is wrong, or is it me, the person, being contradicted?” When asked about how she coped and built her acceptance of the situation, Vilma said:

I am thinking that this would not happen if this wasn’t allowed by God. He trusted me and gave me the chance. I would be capitalizing on the [management’s] trust and God’s trust of putting me in a situation no matter if I do not want it.

The Story of Emy, the one who Climbed Over the Salary Grade

Emy specialized in public relations and writing despite her background in economics. Although she started fresh at the organization, she had more than 30 years of experience at another government agency where she worked as an entry-level information, press, and public relations (PR) officer. Emy shared her experience with how they gather information for articles they publish.

When it comes to fieldwork, there are more men because they handle information technology (IT)- and photography-related tasks better. Men are not a problem in terms of fieldwork because there will be no menstrual cramps, hormonal imbalance, or menstruation problems.

While men were focused on the external fieldwork activities, women were assigned to the office to write and prepare articles for the editors. Emy shared,

There are more women in PR because we are more articulate, and being an attractive woman is an advantage. Editors are mostly males, and they are busy. Some females are smart but not attractive, but being smart is not what the editors see at first glance.

Working in PR, Emy was used to being called to out of the blue meetings with editors to whom she submitted her articles to, to be part of the newspapers. “I am used to it. Even on nights or weekends, we do unpaid work because it is the nature of my job. It is difficult, I have time. My office is busy even on Sundays.”

Only a few years later, she was promoted to a permanent position and rose from the ranks to division chief. She shared, “My promotion and salary increase came fast because I did everything that they asked me to. I was thinking that I am exploited somehow, but if I did not agree to be exploited, would I be promoted that fast?”

Figure 6

Emy’s Personal Data Sheet

28. INCLUSIVE DATES (mm/dd/yyyy)		POSITION TITLE (Write in full/Do not abbreviate)
From	To	
11/11/2022	present	Project Development Officer IV
11/11/2014	11/11/2021	Public Relations Officer IV
11/11/2012	11/11/2014	Public Relations Officer IV
11/11/2002	11/11/2012	Public Relations Officer IV
11/11/1993	11/11/2002	Public Relations Officer III
11/11/1991	11/11/1993	Information Officer II
11/11/1990	11/11/1991	Public Relations Officer I
11/11/1989	11/11/1990	Public Relations Officer I
11/11/1989	11/11/1989	Information Officer I
11/11/1989	11/11/1989	Information Editor

Note. Emy shared a glimpse of her Personal Data Sheet, which serves as the template of profile, experience, and information for government office applicants, to show how fast she rose into the ranks.

Apart from doing more than what was asked and working even beyond office hours without overtime pay, she also shared her motivation to perform. Despite being overloaded with work and uncomfortable with her engagement with article editors, Emy still did her job flawlessly, but harassment was inevitable. According to Emy:

There were sexual harassers. They will touch your hands when you hand your article over. I was sensitive at first, but later, I just made myself think that it is just my hand, and the experience can be washed away. Once the relationship is established, just let them touch your hand because the most important thing is that your article is published the next day.

While she sought help and raised the concern with her supervisor, she was told, “You are a PR officer. It is part of your job to make them feel at home. It is just a hand; you were not raped.”

Hence, she decided that her motivation to be relieved from those tasks was to climb up the ladder.

I went through that. It is normal. We all go through that. I forced myself to overcome those kinds of work. I became the one who sends articles to editors through my female subordinates. I do not know if they experienced what I experienced, as long as I am over it.

The harassment from the editors she experienced was minimized as she gained authority and rose through the ranks. Further, it was deemed normal that women like Emy in

PR shall also experience what Emy had while she was starting on the job which may have possibly posed social and shared impacts.

We must prove ourselves before we can be recognized for what we have as women, but that's the way it is. It has been part of our culture because we were raised that way. We still have more to prove.

Years later, the agency she worked at closed, which opened the opportunity for her to be hired as an executive assistant of another government agency, but as a COS employee. Emy still wanted to aspire to self-develop and shared her intent to join training opportunities at the agency, however, she was limited by her employment status. "I am saddened that I cannot apply because I am beyond the age requirement. I am also limited by my employment status. I reflected that there are limitations of being a COS employee."

Figure 7

Screen capture of a calendar



Note. Emy shared a screen capture of a calendar that showed the appointments of her boss. Per Emy, her current work centralizes on arranging his boss' schedules as his executive assistant.

At the time of the study, she was happy with her role since she was able to apply her multitasking skills in a fast-paced environment even after shifting to a new office.

Look at the director's EAs, they are mostly females, right? Personally, I believe that in an EA, secretarial, or an assistant position, you should have the skill to multitask, and women are the best at multitasking. Let's admit it, men cannot multitask as well as women can.

The women's narratives in the public sector in the study are centered on gendered roles and expectations by the organization and its systems in place, discrimination by their superiors and colleagues that hamper their professional growth and recognition, internalized gendered roles which are affected by the gender socialization from their culture and norms, and other forms of discrimination that intersect with the gender discrimination that they experience. The next part will discuss the different categories of gender workplace discrimination that women have experienced based on the narratives that they shared.

Minimizing and Coping With Gender Workplace Discrimination

From the narratives of women, this section turns to how women cope with and minimize gender discrimination. Based on their narratives, the following themes were generated:

1. Women try to venture into upskilling opportunities on their own to increase their visibility, chances, and recognition of the team they belong to, despite the effect of having more workload and responsibilities.
 - Vilma earned her post-graduate degrees from her efforts while working at the organization. "I am really looking at an organization hoping that there is an equal footing for my unit." (Vilma)

- “I looked for other things to do, hence I entered a master’s program and graduate school because when I express my opinion on meetings and they know that I am studying, I feel that my insights are valid.” (Claire)
2. Women practice submissiveness to earn favors like promotions so they can surpass their struggles which are minimized once they become a figure of authority. Submissiveness also helps them get through their tasks due to perceived easier ways of approval due to their stereotypes and physical appearance.

Despite this as a coping mechanism, it should be noted that submissiveness is also an effect of interpersonal and internalized discrimination. It can be done by women consciously as seen through the following narratives.

- “My promotion and salary increase came fast because I did everything that they asked me to. I was thinking that I am exploited somehow, but if I did not agree to be exploited, would I be promoted that fast?” (Emy)
- “I forced myself to overcome those kinds of work. I became the one who sends articles to editors through my female subordinates. I do not know if they experienced what I experienced, as long as I am over it.” (Emy)
- “According to my supervisor, the director listens more to me because he listens more to a person who’s attractive even if he doesn’t agree to what I am reporting for approval.” (Claire)

Women also practice submissiveness unconsciously as manifested by the internalized discrimination experienced by the research participants:

- “It is normal. We all go through that.” (Emy)
3. Women turn to their spiritual beliefs to learn how to cope with and accept their conditions in the workplace in view of discrimination.

“I am thinking that this would not happen if this wasn’t allowed by God. He trusted me and gave me the chance. I would be capitalizing on the [management’s] trust and God’s trust of putting me in a situation no matter if I do not want it.” (Vilma)

The coping strategies mentioned above represent both conscious and subconscious actions employed by women to navigate their daily work lives despite the discrimination they experience. It is evident from their narratives that these coping mechanisms are limited to experienced individualized discrimination, while there are little to no coping nor mitigating mechanisms to help address other forms, such as institutional, interpersonal, and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Examining Experiences of Gender Workplace Discrimination

The narratives of women were analyzed into four types of gender workplace discrimination that are interlinked to maintain the state of discrimination. The first three categories: institutionalized, interpersonal, and internalized, were initially referred from the types of other forms of discrimination discussed by Rodriguez-Knutsen (2023) (i.e., racism) as deemed similar with the narratives of the research participants in the study. The researcher also added the fourth type, which is the intersectional, based on the analysis of the other forms of discrimination that intertwine with the gender workplace discrimination experienced by women.

Institutionalized

Institutionalized or systemic gender workplace discrimination has its roots in the laws and the current system that is practiced by the organization and its management. This may

also include the unwritten norms and culture as perpetuated by the system and principles the organization upholds.

Though merit systems as advised are said to be adopted, preferential and biased hiring is still apparent. The preference of male leaders to lead divisions has minimized the representations of female leaders in the organization, which has led to unwritten rules that only qualified males can apply and aspire for such positions. Meanwhile, while women take on executive roles, they are limited to the assistant and right-hand staff of the division chiefs, who are males. While there is one female division chief, she leads the division in charge of public relations and communication—an assignment that is perceived to be gendered and more aligned to females as manifested by its number of staff dominated also by women. Conclusively, the existing merit system within the organization was rooted from the existing culture in the workplace of the research participants as they had observed and experienced.

The following narratives from the research participants showed how institutionalized gender discrimination in the workplace were manifested:

- “Look at the director’s EAs, they are mostly females, right? Personally, I believe that in an EA, secretarial, or an assistant position, you should have the skill to multitask, and women are the best at multitasking. Let’s admit it, men cannot multitask as well as women can.” (Emy)
- “It is about a worldview that men are leaders and women are the best supporters.” (Paula)

The management’s instructions are treated as valid as policies. Due to the political nature of hiring and promotion which are heavily influenced by the management’s preference, merit systems, despite being in place sometimes, are intentionally overlooked due to the call

for compliance. Vilma narrated how the director's directives are treated as the rule and reality of the organization:

- “I want to excel here. It is hard for me to accept the decision and the reality of life, but I think that is the bitter pill that all of us here need to swallow. It is the reality of the office, yet I will still try and accept it, as I have no choice.” (Vilma)

To further strengthen the analysis of the narratives on institutionalized gender-based workplace discrimination, the researcher also conducted participant observation to identify the enablers and hindrances within the organization that concern gender workplace discrimination.

In line with the Philippine Commission on Women's initiative, the government agency under study celebrates National Women's Month every March, led by its GFPS. The organization's GFPS is tasked to lead in mainstreaming gender perspective and assessment of the gender-responsiveness of the organization's policies, plans, and programs. Part of the activities is the training and seminars that aim to increase the awareness of the employees regarding gender sensitivity and related gender issues. Last March 2023, the organization led two seminars on gender sensitivity in the workplace, highlighting gendered roles and how an organization can be inclusive in its efforts to promote just employment and work assignments for all. The seminar was the first initiative of the organization from its 35 years of foundation to discuss concepts such as gender discrimination, gender roles, and stereotypes in the context of the workplace.

Though the initial implementation was a success, the awareness raising should be a continuous commitment and initiative of the organization as cultural change does not happen in an instant. Despite the GFPS being aware of this, the GFPS is not functional in terms of proactively programming gender mainstreaming activities in the organization. Since the composition of GFPS is only an ad hoc function and the organization lacks the number of

capable personnel to lead and join the GFPS, there is no designated personnel who can consistently focus to attend to the mandates of the GFPS.

With the perceived successful start of the GAD seminar series last March 2023, the management included the crafting of strategies for gender mainstreaming lined up on the activities for Fiscal Year (FY) 2024. While efforts may initially start with the capacitation of the agency's GFPS, the management perceives that these efforts could benchmark the building of awareness, capacity, and consciousness of making women visible, people with diverse genders, and other employees belonging from other sectors who can also contribute meaningfully to the agency's mandate and operations.

This may be a promising idea, but it has yet to undergo proper program contextualization and assessment for proper inclusion in the agency's lineup of activities for the succeeding years which are yet to be approved by the management. Unless the program has been successfully defended for implementation in the central approving body, the plan for gender mainstreaming for the succeeding year is not yet cast in stone.

The organization has an existing employees' association where this can be discussed and proposed for assessment or for gender audit to the management. However, due to employees' reluctance to speak up about challenges out of fear for their job security, openly addressing these issues among colleagues is challenging. Hence, organization-led seminars where gender discrimination is being discussed may be helpful for affected women to feel more comfortable to open up to the employees' association which can provide them a safe space to share their struggles.

Apart from the gender mainstreaming strategies, there are also other budding efforts to retrofit national policies to the organization's context. Particularly, this refers to the reform of the human resource policies in preparation to acquire a level award for the Program to

Institutionalize Meritocracy and Excellence in Human Resource Management (PRIME-HRM).

The conscious efforts of the organization for the PRIME-HRM are heavily institutional like the compliance of the organization on the CSC's merit system and Equal Employment Opportunity Principle; hence, in the long run, the initiatives may be more leaning towards being compliance-based rather than being driven by warranted change for a more inclusive and enabling environment for women and other marginalized employees to thrive in the organization.

In summary, the human resource policies and procedures, since generally paralleled with what was prescribed by CSC, are weak and are not always clear; hence, this makes way for more gray area mechanisms that make room for hiring discrimination to happen. Existing efforts do exist to mainstream gender equality and address discrimination, but unwritten and informal norms also form part of the institutional culture of an organization.

Interpersonal

Interpersonal is also referred to as personally mediated. This type of discrimination happens when women's conscious and subconscious biases affect how they perceive and interact with others. Stereotypes of themselves and others are often categorized under this type.

Research participants who were in executive positions still struggle with exercising their authority especially when seated with a board with male-dominated executives because of gender stereotypes. Vilma's experience is an example:

- “Is it my idea being contradicted because it is wrong, or is it me, the person, being contradicted?” (Vilma)

Women were given more tasks—most of which they could not refuse because they were perceived to be quality workers; but when it comes to recognition and promotion, they become invisible. Laila’s and Paula’s experiences and observations, respectively, are examples of this:

- “The director was looking for someone trustworthy to handle the administrative division, and he deemed that I am the only one fit for the job.” (Laila)
- “Women are more likely to accept unwanted tasks than men. When men do tasks not aligned with the expertise that they have to work, they are not able to perform the tasks well. The supervisors are more lenient to men compared to women. When women fail on their unwanted tasks, they are treated more negatively as compared to men who fail.” (Paula)
- “Women find it more difficult to decline tasks compared to males because we are softer emotionally than males.” (Paula)

A woman who has experienced discrimination in terms of gendered roles may consciously or unconsciously discriminate against her fellow women by justifying the normality of her experiences, just like how Emy shared:

- “I went through that. It is normal. We all go through that.” (Emy)

Further, while justifying one’s experience as normal may be considered as one of the ways to cope, it may also be framed as a form of discrimination towards another woman. Hence, creating a ripple effect of interpersonal discrimination even towards fellow women in the workplace.

- “I forced myself to overcome those kinds of work. I became the one who sends articles to editors through my female subordinates. I do not know if they experienced what I experienced, as long as I am over it.” (Emy)

Due to the perceived superiority of males and their roles, some women have been victims of sexual harassment. A worse case happened when women who sought the help of authorities within the organization were silenced and forced to move on without resolve, like Emy's experience as an example:

- “You are a PR officer. It is part of your job to make them feel at home. It is just a hand; you were not raped.” (Emy)

Internalized

Referred to as the most toxic type, internalized discrimination is manifested by women who have accepted and believed the negative experiences that happened resulting in “self-devaluation, resignation, and feelings of hopelessness” (Rodriguez-Knutsen, 2023, para. 3).

Due to the hiring, promotion, and delegation culture existing, some of the research participants refuse to take on leadership roles as they feel helpless especially when competing with male candidates. This can be seen on Vilma's account:

- “I would rather not apply [for the job]. I will not be chosen despite being eligible; I will no longer apply.” (Vilma)

Many women refused to participate in the study when invited for an interview due to the threat of their jobs being lost as it is the time of the year when service contracts are renewed. This is also due to the known dynamics of the politics within the office.

- “If that was me, why would I even bother to tire myself in the process when the decision is already made ?” (Vilma's colleague)

Internalized discrimination may also be analyzed from Paula's belief that the problem with and the blame for the system belongs completely to the individuals, particularly their options (i.e., Paula believed that there was minimal to no discrimination taking place if women, despite the majority being in assistant positions, were happy and content in their

positions by choice.) This belief can further be nuanced by analyzing what are the options or choices available, how these options were made available to women, and how women feel about these options available for them. Happiness and contentment of women on their choices, as described by Paula, mask the systemic discrimination taking place within the organization.

Intersectional

Based on the narratives, gender workplace discrimination also intersects with other forms of discrimination on account of connections with internal employees or the management, employment status, age, and even the kind of work, whether technical or administrative. The research participants also shared accounts on intersecting forms of discrimination with gender discrimination in the workplace:

- “A loser is someone like me. I do not have connections with the organization. You will not be noticed and appreciated if you are not involved or connected with any of the employees here.” (Claire)
- “When I became a permanent staff member, I am more confident in my insights. In terms of authority, I am more believable, though sometimes I find it difficult when I am the youngest in a meeting with male project proponents and experts because they do not consider my insights valid. I feel disrespected and sometimes invalidated.” (Claire)

As analyzed from the women’s narratives, the discrimination they face revolves around power imbalances. This includes institutionalized discrimination, where policies exert noticeable control over women, interpersonal and intersectional discrimination manifested through exclusion and limited options, and instances of discriminating against others, intersecting with various forms of discrimination. Additionally, internalized discrimination

emerges from entrenched narratives and cultures that normalize power imbalances, as it is an exercise of hidden power. In essence, all forms of workplace discrimination ultimately stem from power dynamics and contribute to gender inequality.

Recommendations

The recommendations for this research are twofold: one set is intended for future researchers interested in conducting similar studies, while the other is aimed at public sector organizations' institutionalized mechanisms for gender mainstreaming.

1. **On the conduct of the research.** It was observed that during data collection, most women expressed their preference for interviews to be conducted before or after office hours. When questioned about their preference, they cited a cautiousness to avoid being identified as participants in the study.

The research was limited to analyzing the forms of discrimination women experienced through their narratives. With additional time and the alleviation of women's fears of being recognized by their colleagues or fellow participants, incorporating a focus group discussion (FGD) could provide them with a sense of solidarity and an opportunity to collectively strategize ways to address, or at least mitigate, workplace gender discrimination. Future researchers conducting similar studies may consider incorporating FGDs to raise stakeholder awareness of the oppression or discrimination experienced and help the communities collectively act to address these challenges.

2. **On improving the functionality of the existing institutionalized mechanisms for gender mainstreaming.** Recalling that the research participants had their interviews outside office hours, and fear their identities being known for surfacing gender discrimination in the workplace, it can be concluded that this may be associated with

how gender workplace discrimination is indeed a taboo and an unrecognized problem in the organization. Note that this study has only presented gender discrimination on women employees; other gender identities may be a different topic needing attention and addressing. This may also be similar with other government organizations with employees experiencing other forms of unrecognized workplace discrimination.

To address gender discrimination, the first step is to raise the topic for open discussion, and the initiatives on increasing awareness through seminars as well as the commitment of the management to include gender mainstreaming in the priorities may be good benchmarking activities to talk about and address this concern.

Prior to conducting strategies for organization-wide gender mainstreaming, the organization should first prioritize the conduct of a gender audit. According to Harvey (2010), a gender audit is a tool and a process to assess the integration of gender into an organization's policies, programs, and projects. Focused on internal clients, the gender audit uses a participatory process to raise the organization's strengths and weaknesses. It can also explore political barriers and constraints in terms of gender policies and programs in the organization. Thus, the results of the gender audit can be used in properly strategizing the gender mainstreaming efforts fit to the context and needs of the organization.

Apart from the agency's GFPS, the employees' associations are possible avenues for people to share common interests, dreams, and safe spaces. Given that it is a recognized institution with ample power to represent the employees' voices to the management, employees' associations can be a tool for proposing policies and initiatives which can change the current system in place for the betterment of all employees.

Conclusion: Finding and Recognizing Gaps, Making the Change, one by one

Despite the existence of policies and mechanisms aimed at ensuring equal and just employment for all men and women, this study reveals a deeper context requiring attention regarding gender discrimination in the workplace. The limited studies on gender workplace discrimination in the Philippine public sector, which represents a significant portion of the labor force, have resulted in the invisibility of these issues, exacerbating and further marginalizing women in the workplace. Based on discussions, gender discrimination in the public sector workplace, particularly within the government agency under study, can be categorized into four types: institutionalized, interpersonal, internalized, and intersectional.

While there are adopted and institutionalized policies, such as those from the CSC or other national regulatory entities, and collaborative efforts by civil society organizations to minimize gender discrimination in the workplace, the management, which controls the adoption of these policies, may implement counterproductive measures and perpetuate the problem through organizational culture. Considering that an organization can be likened to a community, interpersonal interactions among women and among team members can perpetuate conscious and unconscious gender workplace discrimination, particularly concerning gendered roles and organizational culture. As also highlighted in the discussions, the unchanging outcomes of failed applications for promotion and opportunities have led to hopelessness and internalized gender discrimination. Lastly, while the initial three categories contribute to maintaining the state of discrimination, other forms of discrimination intersect with women's experiences in the workplace, including factors like age, employment status, and nature of work, among others.

The women's ways to cope as observed are mostly their internal efforts. The initiative to organize is yet to begin once the problem has been taken out in the open to be recognized and talked about. This is the moment when collective solutions within the organization and

the affected sector will be discussed, as well as representations will be properly placed in making decisions. These, in complementation with the organization's efforts, will be enough to make at least a dent of change in addressing gender discrimination in the workplace starting in the organization which may later be adopted by other public sector agencies.

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