

Exclusion and discrimination in the labor market

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Although it may be difficult to “prove” that discrimination exists in the labor market, most people would acknowledge the fact that it does exist. However, others opine that the job an individual secures or the salary they are paid depends, to some degree, on the kind of person one is and the circles they associate with (Berry & Bell, 2012). The insidiousness, imperviousness, and complexity surrounding the issue of exclusion and discrimination are intricate as they are difficult to separate. In the past, the idea of the differential labor market has focused on race, gender, ethnicity, and religion.

Recently, this bracket has expanded to include age, sexual orientation, and disability status. Economic and sociological theories have been used to explain the labor market as being a social entity. Economic theories, for instance, differentiate between the demand for labor and its supply. However, according to Pager, Western, and Bonikowski (2009), if the effects of macro-level norms are taken into account, the differentiation is blurred. This is evident in the significant differences in labor force participation by women based on region, ethnicity, religion, and social status all around the world. In South Asia for example, female participation in the labor market is particularly low especially in the case of Muslim women and is made worse by the practice of veiling women.

It is believed that the “code” of discrimination is most often hidden to the extent that even those executing the discrimination act may not be aware they are doing so for the fact that it is engrained in social norms. It is true that what may not have been considered as discrimination in the workplace several years ago, may be regarded today. For instance, what may be considered as harassing behavior today, were normative years ago. Even after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, federal courts in the U.S still did not view sexual harassment as a form of discrimination (Berry & Bell, 2012).

Exclusion and discrimination may take numerous forms with many being intangible and some being invisible; thereby, making them un-measurable. Conscious discrimination

occurs when the hiring process is predetermined for a particular type of worker to be hired. However, there can be unconscious discrimination or exclusion when hiring, promotion or remuneration decisions are made based on stereotypes and prejudice. For example, the notion that African American workers are “lazy” or that of women having low commitment are internalized in the society that many consider them as truisms (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009).

These stereotypes infiltrate hiring authorities and in turn have a significant bearing on the entire hiring process, no matter how innocent it may be. Measuring exclusion and discrimination are made more difficult by the fact that they may be overt or covert. In the case of overt discrimination and exclusion, a firm may advertise jobs by openly asking for women to fill certain positions or indicate differences in retirement ages for men and women (International Labor Organisation, 2011). On the other hand, covert discrimination sorts occupational sex segregation into “females” and “males.” This makes covert discrimination difficult to observe. Finally, discrimination and exclusion may be perceived or real. Perceived discrimination is in most cases because of historical inequalities that reduce specific groups to lower cadres in the social hierarchy. Consequently, such groups will collectively perceive themselves as being discriminated against in the labor market. With real discrimination, there has to be observable evidence of the discrimination, empirically or policy wise.

Despite the fact that discrimination and exclusion may be hard to substantiate, changes in the work conditions may encourage participation of excluded groups, even when such changes may not be aimed at ending discrimination in the labor market. All around the world, a shift towards transparency and openness has led to the increase in confidence of non-preferred groups. Overall, a better understanding is required on the role that norms and attitudes play on non-discrimination if governments, firms, and individuals are to formulate

better policies to reduce discrimination and exclusion in the labor market (International Labor Organisation, 2011).

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