

Gender discrimination and the backlash effect in recruitment and dismissal processes: experimental evidence from Slovakia

Backlash effect
in recruitment

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Abstract

Purpose – Following Goldberg’s paradigm, this study aims to investigate whether women and men are at risk of differential treatment by HR professionals in recruitment and dismissal processes and focuses on the impact of exogenous factors, such as discrimination and gender norms.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 155 individuals with experience as HR professionals participated in a randomised vignette study. In Task 1, they evaluated three applicants (all three either men or women) for the post of regional sales manager based on the applicant’s competences, hireability, likeability and proposed salary. In Task 2, participants were asked to select one of the six employees for dismissal and provide a rationale for their choice.

Findings – In Task 1, female applicants were offered significantly lower salaries than male applicants. In addition, average and low-performing male applicants were assessed as less likeable than identical females. In Task 2, the willingness to dismiss increased when employees with frequent absences were presented as men.

Originality/value – By involving a sample of HR professionals, the study contributes to the literature and practice by highlighting the differential treatment of women and men in the labour market. While women are likely to experience direct discrimination in the form of significantly lower pay offers, men may suffer a backlash due to lower educational attainment and absenteeism. The findings suggest that the labour market situation for women is complex and affected by norms and expectations requiring men to behave in a masculine and career-oriented way.

Keywords Gender discrimination, Gender bias, Backlash effect, Differential treatment, Slovakia

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality, European women on average earn 20% less than men, and the pension gap is even wider (35%). In specific industries, such as finance and insurance, the adjusted gender wage gap – controlling for years of education and tenure, calculated by Amado *et al.* (2018) – can exceed 40%, with occupational

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segregation remaining a significant factor contributing to this gap throughout the EU. Specifically, 30% of working women are employed in education, health and social work compared to only 8% of men. In contrast, only 7% of women work in science, technology, engineering and medicine, while a third of the male workforce is employed in STEM sectors, which attract higher compensation. Women are also significantly overrepresented in part-time work – over 30% compared to 8% of men. Finally, nearly 80% of women do household chores daily – including cooking, cleaning and caring for family members – compared to only 34% of men, which can also contribute to unequal labour market outcomes.

Previous research has attempted to identify the sources of these disparities and indicates that women's distinct preferences, motivations and life choices could account for the unequal distribution of household chores, occupational segregation and the gender wage gap (Adamus and Ballová Mikušková, 2021; Bertrand, 2018). Empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that women have different preferences and make different educational choices. It indicates that women are less mobile in the labour market, value greater flexibility even at the cost of lower wages, take jobs in sectors offering lower compensation and prefer fixed over volatile compensation schemes (Petrongolo and Ronchi, 2020). However, some persistent labour market disparities, including the residual pay gaps that remain after controlling for a relevant employee's characteristics, may be attributable to discrimination and gender biases (Blau and Kahn, 2017) and heavily influenced by persistent sexism in the culture.

To investigate the role of gender biases, the potential backlash effect and discrimination in pay offers and employment/dismissal processes, we ran a randomised vignette experiment. Participants (HR professionals) had to evaluate three applicants for a regional manager vacancy in a winery, assessing competence, hireability and likeability and suggesting a salary for each applicant. Following Goldberg's (1968) paradigm, half of the participants received CVs presented as belonging to women, and the other half received the same CVs but presented as men's. In the second task, participants had to select one employee for dismissal from a list of six and provide a rationale for their decision.

The paper's contribution is threefold. Firstly, by focusing on a sample of individuals professionally involved in recruiting and dismissal processes, it provides meaningful information on the general labour market. Secondly, the study corroborates in an understudied cultural context the view that the explanation for persistent gender disparities lies in the different norms and expectations attributed to women and men. Finally, the study shows that gender norms may harm both men and women in the labour market, but in different ways. While women face direct discrimination in the form of lower wage offers, men are likely to be punished for violating the male gender norm of being a career-oriented breadwinner.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Gender-based stereotypical evaluations of applicants

Past studies have shown that gender is used as a reliable indicator of competence in real market settings, for example, in musical auditions (Goldin and Rouse, 2000) or among people seeking work waiting tables in a high-end restaurant (Neumark, 2018). This suggests that those who make employment decisions are likely to be prone to gender biases. Gender-role theory (Eagly, 1987) posits that these biases may be related to frequent observation of behaviours in either men or women. Women are seen as caregivers with a greater dedication to family life and men as career-oriented breadwinners. Moreover, gender-typed roles are believed to reflect innate dispositions and stimulate the development of relevant skills and abilities (Eagly *et al.*, 2000). By observing how men and women are assigned to different roles, individuals may come to believe that gender predicts a set of characteristics relevant

to labour market performance. This leads to the notion that women are equipped with superior communal traits related to caregiving roles. However, in the absence of sufficient observation in job-related roles, they may be seen as lacking productive traits. Consequently, women may be assessed as less competent and less desirable employees compared to men. Conversely, due to the frequent observation of women as caregivers – a role associated with communal traits, such as being tender and sympathetic – women may be perceived as more friendly and likeable (Eagly *et al.*, 2000). We, therefore, expected the following results from applicant evaluations for this job:

H1a/b/c. Women would be perceived as less (a) hireable and (b) competent but more (c) likeable than otherwise identical men.

Economists have also suggested that when information is scarce, employers may believe that gender is a reliable signal of both competence and labour-market attachment, even if that belief is biased (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972). The stereotypes used as cognitive shortcuts could therefore distort the evaluation of potential employees by focusing on characteristics typically associated with the applicant's group rather than the applicant's merits. Moreover, economists believe that women's assumed aptitude for caregiving gives them a comparative advantage in homemaking roles over men (Becker, 1985). In a labour market context, this implies that women attempting to reconcile work- and family-related roles devote less attention to and put less effort into work. Since there is greater uncertainty concerning women's performance, productivity and labour market attachment, their work may, at least initially, be less valued to compensate for the risk of unsatisfactory outputs. Thus, in line with the data and economic theory, we hypothesised that:

H2. Women would receive lower salary offers than otherwise identical male applicants.

Finally, gender role theory posits that by seeing women in predominantly family-oriented roles and associating communal traits with them, employers may come to believe that women, on average, lack the skills and motivation required for a job. Consequently, they may be reluctant to employ women. Indeed, Moss-Racusin *et al.* (2012) observed significant implicit biases among female and male faculty members when assessing female graduate applicants for a lab manager job and pointed out that female applicants were systematically assessed as less hireable *because* they were perceived as less competent. Consistent with these findings, we expected that:

H3. Women's hireability would be affected by perceptions that they are less competent.

Moderating effects of essentialist views of gender roles and gender-role orientation

Despite the considerable amount of research on gender biases and discrimination, less is known about the moderators that drive these adverse effects. Recently, Kray *et al.* (2017) investigated potential moderators and speculated that one important factor is the naive notions people have when explaining whether gender roles are fixed (*essentialist view*) or malleable and socially constructed. Supporters of the essentialist view tend to believe that differences between men and women are fundamental and that they reflect immutable and innate dispositions typical of all men or women. This thus makes biological sex a proxy for a set of relevant characteristics. Although they are not overtly sexist, essentialist views may give rise to stereotyping and prejudices based on biological sex (Block *et al.*, 2019; Rhodes and Moty, 2020). In the labour market, such dubious views may lead to the belief that the gendered division of jobs and differential treatment of men and women are justified by

different expected outcomes (Fine *et al.*, 2020; Şahin and Soylu Yalcinkaya, 2021; Skewes *et al.*, 2018). This explains why women may be assessed less favourably than men in recruitment and dismissal processes. If women are *essentially* less competent, they make less deserving and desirable employees. Moreover, essentialist views may serve as a justification of the status quo and enhance men's identification with masculinity as an indicator of their affiliation with a privileged group. Indeed, Kray *et al.* (2017) found that, for men, the effect of essentialist views may be strengthened by the self-attribution of socially praised masculine traits, leading to the rationalisation of gender inequalities as fair and just. Drawing on these results, we investigated the moderating role of gender-role orientation and essentialist views on the assessment of applicants. We hypothesised that:

H4. Subscribing to essentialist views of gender roles would contribute to greater biases against women.

And:

H5. Men's biases against women applicants would be strengthened by participants' identification with stereotypically masculine traits.

Backlash as a response to role-incongruent behaviour

Finally, Miller and Borgida (2016) pointed out that men and women are stereotypically assigned to different spheres – work and family, respectively. In line with gender role theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), recent research has found evidence that individuals are likely to be penalised for behaviour incongruent with gender-relevant norms that dictate how men and women ought to behave (*prescriptive norms*) and ought not to behave (*proscriptive norms*) (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2010). Individuals who adopt roles incongruent with gender norms face a backlash – i.e. strong social and economic penalties – aimed at defending gender hierarchies and the current status quo, with men in the privileged position (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). This can have widespread effects on labour market outcomes (lower wages or lack of promotion) and cause hostility in the working environment and social punishment (disapproval, mockery and taunting). Commonly, the literature links this backlash with the trade-off faced by women: they may be perceived either as competent or as likeable (Rudman and Glick, 1999, 2001). Thus, to increase hireability, women have to present themselves as competent, ambitious and competitive (Rudman and Phelan, 2008). Yet, when presenting themselves as agentic, women may be viewed as *atypical*, violating prescriptive gender norms that require them to show stereotypically feminine (communal) traits. This, in turn, may lead to lower ratings for communal traits, such as interpersonal skills and lower likeability, among highly competent women. Therefore, we hypothesised:

H6a. The backlash against women would manifest itself in lower likeability scores of highly competent female applicants compared to highly competent male applicants.

Although the backlash effect is usually discussed in the context of female discrimination and remains understudied in men, Rudman *et al.* (2012) suggested that gender norms are strongly prescriptive on how *both* genders ought and ought not behave. Recent studies have provided support for the hypothesis that men who violate prescriptive and proscriptive gender norms also face the risk of backlash. For instance, atypical (modest) men who violate proscriptive (e.g. weakness and uncertainty) as well as prescriptive norms (e.g. confidence and ambition) are likely to encounter social and economic penalties by being ranked as less likeable, competent and suitable for managerial roles (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2010; Rudman and Phelan, 2008). The

literature also supports the view that male employees with more caregiving responsibilities – incongruent with the demands of the work environment or the notion of a good employee – suffer a flexibility or femininity stigma and are less likely to be promoted or more likely to be dismissed or have their working hours reduced (Miller and Borgida, 2016; Rudman and Mescher, 2013). The authors explained that incongruent behaviour may threaten the gendered organisational hierarchy and social status quo and thus invokes punishment. Therefore, we hypothesised that when a company faces a financial crisis:

H6b. Professional profile irregularities and higher absenteeism – signalling stronger family-orientation – increases the likelihood of dismissal.

Methods

Participants and design

The data were collected by an external agency in Slovakia (chosen in an ESOMAR-compliant tender) via an online survey hosted on Qualtrics between 21 and 30 April 2020. Raw data are available at: <https://osf.io/8fsj5/>. A total of 155 HR professionals (97 women) aged 22–70 participated in the study ($M_{age} = 41.48$, $SD_{age} = 9.57$) and were compensated by the agency through an internal compensation system. To indicate the effect size, the sample was capable of detecting, a post hoc power analysis was performed. The power analysis indicated a 100% chance of detecting a medium effect size (defined by Cohen, 1992) between the two groups at the 5% significance level. Participants were self-employed (33.5%) or employees (59.4%) of micro businesses (1–9 employees; $n = 19$), small businesses (10–49 employees; $n = 31$), medium businesses (50–249 employees; $n = 23$) and large businesses (more than 250 employees; $n = 19$); 7.1% chose other options (maternity leave, pension). Participants were selected based on HR employment experience, and although we wanted a sample consistent with the general gender composition of HR jobs, the decisive inclusion criterion was experience, not gender.

Measurement and procedure

After reading and signing the informed consent form, the participants completed seven demographic questions. We then showed participants the cover story [1] and asked them to select the best applicant for the post of regional manager in a winery. We prepared two identical sets of three CVs – one set with men’s names and one set with women’s names (see Appendix 1 for details). The following details were given for each applicant: name, age, address, contact, education, work experience, courses and workshops, language skills, key skills, interests and previous employment references. All three applicants were aged 30–40. The applicants differed in terms of experience, education and vocational training, with one being the best and one the worst (see Table 1 for vignette factors and factor levels).

Factor	Factor levels	
Gender	2 levels	<i>Male/female</i>
Age	3 levels	<i>35, 36 and 37</i>
Educational attainment	3 levels	<i>3 universities of different quality</i>
Professional experience	3 levels	<i>8 years and a small team, 10 years and a medium team, 11 years and a big team</i>
Vocational training	3 levels	<i>Considerable and job-related, average and none</i>

Table 1.
Vignette factors and factor levels

The applicants' surnames were selected from among the most common surnames in Slovakia. Participants were randomly divided into two groups: one group assessed the CVs of applicants with male names ($n = 77$; 53 women), and the other group assessed the same CVs but with female names ($n = 78$; 44 women).

In the second task, we investigated whether women were more likely to be fired when a company faces a financial crisis. After completing Task 1, all participants were mixed together and randomly divided into two groups to choose one of six employees earmarked for potential dismissal. We created two employee lists (with three men and three women on each) that were identical except for gender, i.e. the genders were swapped: employees presented as women on list A were presented as men on list B, and those presented as men on list A were presented as women on list B. The lists included short descriptions of six employees (described by gender, age, years with the company and absenteeism rate), and participants had to choose the most suitable candidate for dismissal. One group chose from list A, the other group from list B.

Finally, all participants completed the Implicit Gender Role (IGR) Theory questionnaire and the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The materials included a control question to eliminate random responses (participants had to click on a specific option: "Now click response 5").

Demographic characteristics. All participants stated their age, gender, years of HR experience, employment status (*student, self-employed, employee, on maternity leave, retired, unemployed and other*), company size (*micro, small, medium and large*), legal form (*state enterprise, semi-publicly funded organisation, publicly funded organisation, cooperative, trading company, enterprise of an individual, enterprise with foreign investment and third sector*) and business activity (*production and services*).

Assessment of applicants. The participants assessed the CVs by means of 11 questions. For each of the three applicants, we computed the mean for competency (three items), hireability (three items) and likeability (three items). The last two questions concerned the starting salary and average monthly salary after the probationary period; details of the descriptive statistics are given in [Table 2](#).

Selecting employee to be dismissed. Based on the information provided in the materials, participants were asked to select one employee from a list of six to be dismissed. Participants were divided into two groups; one group chose an employee from list A, and the second group chose one from list B (see [Appendix 1](#) for details).

Essentialist views. A ten-item questionnaire – IGR adopted from [Kray et al. \(2017\)](#) – was used to measure essentialist views. Participants assessed the fixedness of gender roles (example of a standard item: "I think that men and women will always have different social roles"; example of a reversed item: "As society progresses, men and women will eventually occupy similar roles in society") on a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree); five items are reverse-scored. The mean score was computed ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 0.94$; $\omega = 0.862$); a higher mean score indicated greater endorsement of the belief that gender roles are fixed and immutable.

Masculinity and femininity. We used the short versions of the BSRI ([Bem, 1974](#)) to measure femininity and masculinity. Participants had to self-assess regarding 12 traits indicative of gender roles using a six-point scale (1 = never; 6 = always). The mean scores for masculinity ($M = 4.53$; $SD = 0.79$; $\omega = 0.875$) and femininity ($M = 4.48$; $SD = 0.83$; $\omega = 0.882$) were computed; a higher score indicated stronger masculinity and femininity.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all the variables measured and differences between the assessments of the female and male applicants are given in [Table 2](#).

Assessment of applicants	Male applicants				Female applicants				p	d	
	N	ω	M	SD	N	ω	M	SD			t
<i>Best</i>											
Competence	77	0.910	5.74	0.93	78	0.992	5.73	1.08	0.059	153	0.953
Hireability	77	0.893	5.51	1.08	78	0.987	5.67	1.02	-0.949	153	0.344
Likeability	77	0.879	5.41	0.88	78	0.990	5.61	0.94	-1.403	153	0.163
Starting salary	77	-	1,230.39	451.86	78	-	1,055.77	295.64	2.845	152	0.005
Salary after probation	77	-	1,498.55	531.91	78	-	1,314.03	361.49	2.513	151	0.013
<i>Medium</i>											
Competence	77	0.931	5.37	0.91	78	0.991	5.34	1.12	0.158	153	0.875
Hireability	77	0.916	5.32	1.03	78	0.981	5.41	1.03	-0.546	153	0.586
Likeability	77	0.898	5.16	0.95	78	0.986	5.47	0.85	-2.073	153	0.040
Starting salary	77	-	1,128.55	335.66	78	-	1,014.74	278.11	2.294	152	0.023
Salary after probation	77	-	1,368.95	408.98	78	-	1,255.45	343.92	1.859	151	0.065
<i>Worst</i>											
Competence	77	0.918	3.95	1.29	78	0.984	4.11	1.24	-0.777	153	0.438
Hireability	77	0.939	3.80	1.40	78	0.974	4.12	1.39	-1.437	153	0.153
Likeability	77	0.929	4.06	1.20	78	0.984	4.50	1.17	-2.277	153	0.024
Starting salary	77	-	1,012.24	291.67	78	-	920.26	252.79	2.093	152	0.038
Salary after probation	77	-	1,225.79	367.40	78	-	1,151.30	316.12	1.345	151	0.181

Notes: N = number; ω : reliability (omega); M = mean; SD: standard deviation; t: t-test value; df = degree of freedom; p = significance; d = Cohen's d; italic $p < 0.01$, bold $p < 0.05$

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Table 2.
Descriptive statistics
for the variables
measured and
differences between
the assessments of
male and female
applicants

Firstly, we analysed whether women were assessed as less competent, likeable and hireable (everything else being constant) and received lower salary offers than otherwise identical men (*H1–H2; H6a*). The independent sample *t*-test revealed no significant differences in the assessments of competence, likeability and hireability for the identical top-ranking female and male applicants, but there were significant differences in the salary offers (Figure 1; Table 1). HR professionals offered the man a starting salary with an additional €174.63 per month ($t = 2.845; p = 0.005; d = 0.459$) and a monthly salary with an additional €184.53 per month after the probationary period ($t = 2.513; p = 0.013; d = 0.406$) compared with the salary offers for an identical woman.

Effect of competence on hireability

Next, given the strong hireability relationships with both competence and likeability (Table 3) – regardless of whether the applicant was a man or a woman – we conducted a regression analysis to verify the effect of competence on the hireability of female applicants (*H3*). A significant regression equation was found [$F(1,76) = 244.759, p < 0.001$], with R^2 of 0.763. Female applicant hireability was $0.950 + 0.823$ (competence), with hireability measured in points. Female applicant hireability increased by 0.823 points for each competence point. Results for male applicants were very similar [$F(1,75) = 183.309, p < 0.001$, with R^2 of 0.710]. Male applicant hireability was $-0.113 + 0.979$ (competence) points, and male applicant hireability increased by 0.979 points for each competence point.

For medium applicants, a significant regression equation was found [$F(1,76) = 142.617, p < 0.001$], with an R^2 of 0.652. Female medium applicants had a hireability of $1.439 + 0.743$ (competence) points, and the results for the male medium applicants were very similar [$F(1,75) = 179.434, p < 0.001$, with R^2 of 0.705]. Male medium applicants had a hireability of $0.255 + 0.943$ (competence) points. Finally, for the worst applicants, a significant regression equation was found [$F(1,76) = 389.175, p < 0.001$], with an R^2 of 0.837. Female worst applicants had a hireability of $-0.077 + 1.023$ (competence) points, and the results for the male worst applicants were very similar, [$F(1,75) = 241.886,$

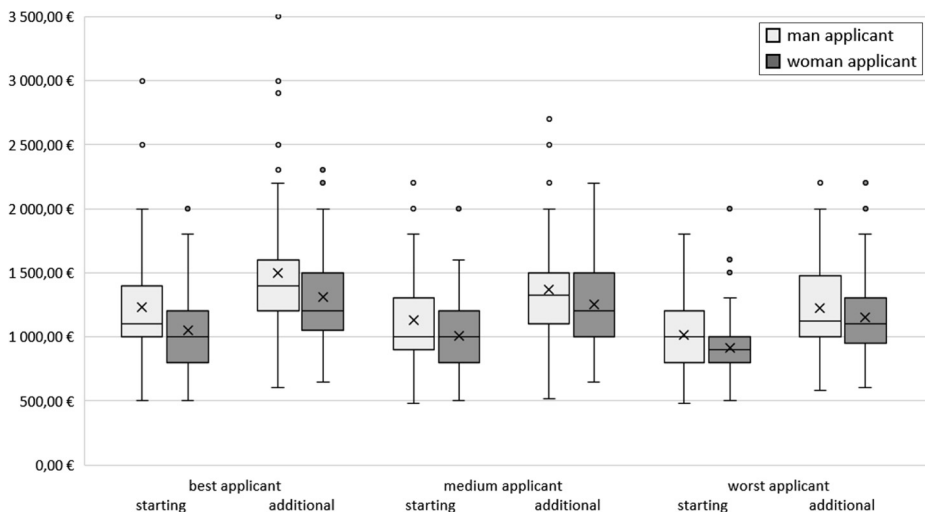


Figure 1. Differences in starting salary and salary after probation offered to female and male applicants at three competence levels

Source: Authors' own creation

Assessment of applicants	Best		Medium		Worst	
	Female hire.	Male like.	Female hire.	Male like.	Female hire.	Male like.
Competence	0.875**	0.817**	0.808**	0.698**	0.807**	0.837**
Hireability	0.870**	0.842**	0.808**	0.828**	0.859**	0.858**

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; hire. = hireability, like. = likeability

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Table 3.
Correlations between
applicants'
hireability,
competence and
likeability

$p < 0.001$, with an R^2 of 0.763]. Male worst applicants had a hireability of $0.056 + 0.949$ (competence) points.

Effect of sex and gender on discrimination

Next, we checked whether higher masculinity and essentialist views were associated with greater male susceptibility to cognitive biases (stereotyping) in the perceptions of women and, consequently, to discriminating against female applicants (*H4–H5*). Male HR professionals did not assess the top-, middle- and bottom-ranking female and male applicants differently on competence, likeability, hireability or salary offer. And we found no relationship between holding essentialist views, masculinity and discrimination against the top-ranking female applicant (nor in preference for the top-ranking male applicant), with two exceptions. Firstly, a relationship was found between essentialist views and the top-ranking female applicant's hireability. Secondly, the femininity of male HR professionals correlated with the hireability and likeability of the top-ranking female applicant (Table 4). The results were similar for the middle- and bottom-ranking applicants (Table 4).

Interesting findings were obtained in relation to the group of female HR professionals. Female HR professionals offered the top- and middle-ranking male applicant a significantly higher salary than the otherwise identical woman (starting salary for top: €1,224.23 versus €1,012.50; $t = 2.736$; $p = 0.007$; $d = 0.560$; salary after probation for top: €1,502.12 versus €1,264.77; $t = 2.532$; $p = 0.013$; $d = 0.519$; starting salary for medium: €1,126.35 versus €995.45; $t = 2.017$; $p = 0.047$; $d = 0.413$). Moreover, female HR professionals assessed the middle- and bottom-ranking women as likeable (middle: $t = 2.483$; $p = 0.015$; $d = 0.506$; bottom: $t = 2.555$; $p = 0.012$; $d = 0.521$) and more hireable (bottom: $t = 2.190$; $p = 0.031$; $d = 0.447$) than the men. Nevertheless, no relationship was found between essentialist views and masculinity/femininity and discrimination against the top- and middle-ranking female applicant (nor the preference for the top-ranking male applicant).

Given the differences between the female and male applicants and between the results for the male HR professionals and the female HR professionals, a two-way ANOVA was conducted on the effect of the HR professional's gender and the applicant's gender on the assessment of applicants (competence, hireability, likeability and salary offer on entry and after probation). Regarding the top-ranking applicant, the applicant's gender had a

Applicants/Assessment of applicants	Essentialist views	Masculinity	Femininity
<i>Best female applicants</i>			
Competence	ns	ns	ns
Hireability	0.368*	ns	0.362*
Likeability	ns	ns	0.433*
<i>Medium female applicants</i>			
Competence	ns	ns	0.373*
Hireability	ns	ns	0.411*
Likeability	ns	ns	0.471**
<i>Worst female applicants</i>			
Competence	ns	ns	0.359*
Hireability	ns	ns	ns
Likeability	ns	ns	0.405*

Notes: ns = not significant; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4. Correlations of female applicant assessments by male HR professionals

significant effect on the salary offer both on entry and after probation, as significant differences were seen between the starting salary offered to female versus male applicants [$F(1,149) = 7.176; p = 0.008$] as well as salary after probation [$F(1,149) = 5.140; p = 0.025$], with the man being offered more (for means, see Table 2). The salary offered was not dependent on the HR professional's gender but on whether the applicant was a man or a woman.

For the middle-ranking applicant, the HR professional's sex affected the assessment of competence [$F(1,151) = 4.773; p = 0.030$; for means, see Table 2]: female HR professionals assessed the applicant as more competent than male HR professionals. The applicant's sex also affected the starting salary [$F(1,150) = 4.656; p = 0.033$; for means, see Table 2]: the woman was offered a lower starting salary than the man. Moreover, there was a significant effect of interaction between the effects of the HR professional's and applicant's sex on the applicant's hireability [$F(1, 151) = 4.219, p = 0.042$]: men assessed men as more hireable, and women assessed women as more hireable.

For the bottom-ranking applicant, the applicant's sex affected the starting salary offered [$F(1,150) = 4.344; p = 0.039$]: the woman was offered a lower starting salary than the man (for means, see Table 2).

Finally, we tested who is more likely to be fired when the company faced a financial crisis (*H6b*). In the open question on the reason for the applicant's dismissal, the main criteria were absenteeism rate (77.8% gave this reason) and years with the company (43.1%); weaker deciding criteria were being young (8.9%) and male (8.9%).

HR professionals identified three applicants for dismissal (highlighted in Table 5). In all three cases, participants selected male applicants for dismissal and explained their choices by reference to absenteeism rate, years with the company, age and gender (for example, "He is a man, he can easily find a new job." "He—as a man—is absent too much").

To examine whether holding essentialist views relates to these decisions, we extracted two groups of participants – those low in essentialist views (lowest quartile in the IGR; score of less than 2.9) and those high in essentialist views (highest quartile in the IGR; score of more than 4.1) – and compared their choices. No differences were seen between HR professionals scoring low and high in essentialist views regarding the applicant they would fire ($\chi^2 = 3.672, p = 0.452$).

Discussion

The present study contributes to the literature by investigating implicit gender biases exhibited by HR professionals and indicating possible ways that both genders may be disadvantaged in the labour market. The study also suggests that it is impossible to account for the entire gender wage gap and other labour market disparities without taking into account tacit forms of discrimination and gender biases that lead to the differential treatment of female and male employees. Our results indicate that gender biases can occur in two critical stages of employment – the recruitment and dismissal of employees – and show that discriminatory mechanisms tend to be different for women and men, with women more likely to be directly discriminated against in the form of lower salary offers, while counter-stereotypical men experience a backlash effect. Apart from finding direct evidence that a considerable portion of the gender wage gap could be attributable to discrimination, the most important contribution of the paper is the finding on the backlash effect, which punishes men for lower educational attainment and absenteeism. The findings suggest that women's labour market situation is complex and is also affected by norms and expectations requiring men to behave in a masculine and career-oriented way.

Table 5.
Selection of employee
for dismissal

Applicant (age, years in the company and absences)	Form A, <i>n</i> = 77		Form B, <i>n</i> = 78	
	Gender, (%)	Reasoning	Gender, (%)	Reasoning
36, 6 years with Co., almost no absences	w, 0.0		m, 1.3	
37, 7 years with Co., almost no absences	m, 0.0		w, 0.0	
35, 5 years with Co., some absences	w, 1.3		m, 12.8	Absences, fewer years with Co., male, young
36, 6 years with Co., some absences	m, 2.6		w, 1.3	
37, 7 years with Co., frequent absences	w, 9.1	Absences	m, 41.0	Absences, fewer years with Co., male (too many absences), young
38, 5 years in Co., frequent absences	m, 87.0	Absences, fewer years with Co., male	w, 43.6	Absences, fewer years with Co., young

Notes: w = woman; m = man

Wage discrimination faced by women

Contrary to the study by [Moss-Racusin et al. \(2012\)](#), we found no support for biases affecting female hireability. For the managerial post in the study, women were considered equally competent and hireable as male applicants (*H1a/b*; *H3*). Although women and men were perceived as equally competent and hireable at all three quality levels, we found that women still received lower salary offers (*H2*). The differences were large and indicated that women are likely to experience discrimination when applying for a job. In other words, their work is assessed and priced differently compared to that of otherwise identical males. These findings provide important information for the debate on the gender wage gap and corroborate previous findings that the gap starts with employment ([Grund, 2015](#)). The findings also raise concerns about whether the persistent gender wage gap can be explained and residual barriers to gender equality combatted without including discrimination in the analysis.

The difference between the salaries proposed for men and women in our study (between 7 and 15%) was less than the raw gender wage gap for Slovakia (about 20% according to gender equality index). However, we observed two interesting patterns related to the gap. Firstly, the greatest difference was between the two best applicants and the smallest between the two worst. The wider gap between the better qualified applicants indicates that men are awarded an additional premium for being perceived as highly skilled. Secondly, we found that the gap tended to decrease following the probationary period, suggesting that there is greater uncertainty over female applicants despite their being perceived as equally competent. Nevertheless, once they have proved they are valuable employees, they can expect their salary to increase just as much as men's. Ultimately, however, they will still receive significantly less than their male counterparts.

Interestingly, unlike previous studies ([Kray et al., 2017](#); [Moss-Racusin et al., 2012](#); [Skewes et al., 2018](#)), we found that the effect is not moderated by essentialist views on gender roles or by the individual's gender-role orientation (*H4–H5*). Regardless of their beliefs about the malleability or fixedness of gender norms and their masculinity, participants still offered lower salaries to female applicants. This finding may be down to the sample composition since [Kray et al. \(2017\)](#) found that implicit role theories affect men's attitudes more than women's. However, considering that human resources is a slightly feminised occupation, our findings provide a valuable and reliable observation of the possible real-life outcomes and indicate that for professionals with experience in the recruitment process, implicit prejudices against women have a limited impact on assessments. Generally, there were no moderators of the phenomenon other than female HR professionals driving the effect.

One reason for the lower proposed salary (though not investigated directly in our study) could be that women have lower reservation wages – the minimum pay an individual is willing to accept for a job. Previous research has indicated that a considerable portion of the starting salary gap may be due to differences in men's and women's reservation wages ([Caliendo et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, in an additional survey conducted a couple of days after the present study, we explored whether the effect could be related to lower wage expectations among women in the relevant group of the Slovak population ([Adamus and Ballová Mikušková, 2021](#)). We asked a sample of 380 adult Slovaks (200 female) what salary they would be willing to accept for the vacancy described in the main study (see [Appendix 2](#)). On average, women were willing to accept €1,521.88, while men thought €1,638.63 was acceptable. This difference is not statistically significant, indicating that both women and men have similar salary expectations when applying for the same or similar jobs.

Gender norms and backlash against men

Our study also provides insights into the impact of gender norms on men's labour market outcomes. Contrary to our expectations (*H6a*), rather than women being punished for being

seen as competent, it was male applicants who were seen as less likeable when they had lower educational attainment and less professional experience (Task 1). In Task 2, we found that during an economic crisis and in a gender-balanced environment, participants were more likely to dismiss male employees than otherwise identical females (*H6b*). Interestingly, when asked an open-ended question about the reasons for dismissal, they indicated that male employees selected for dismissal had work patterns resembling those of women: they had numerous absences owing to caring responsibilities or more days of sick leave. Alongside the findings about below-average males being less likeable, the study shows that there are strong gender norms requiring men to pursue their career even at the cost of family life and punishing them socially (lower likeability) and economically (greater probability of being dismissed) for incongruent behaviour. The findings are in line with a study by [Rudman and Mescher \(2013\)](#), which found that male employees who requested family leave were perceived as weaker and more feminine (perceived as a negative characteristic in a man), as well as less ambitious and competitive. As a consequence, those who requested family leave were labelled as poor workers and omitted when rewards were distributed and were more likely to be demoted or dismissed.

Our findings thus have potentially significant consequences for men seeking a work-life balance, indicating that they are at risk of being judged according to double standards that assign a family orientation to women and a career orientation to men ([Miller and Borgida, 2016](#)). Specifically, it is accepted that women will enter and leave the labour market frequently: first for childbirth and then because of their caring responsibilities (related to both children and senior family members). It is expected that women will seek employment that allows greater flexibility in terms of working hours (part-time jobs and home office) and provides a better work-life balance. Similar behaviour in men is only acceptable at a much lower rate ([Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020](#)).

Interpreting our results, we should remember that Slovakia scores 24th among all 27 EU states in the Gender Equality Index. With an average score of 56.0, Slovakia is far behind the EU average (68.6–100 indicates full equality). Specifically, 78% of women do household chores (32% of men) and 37% of women are involved in caring activities daily (25% of men). Also, according to Eurobarometer, Slovakia is among the most conservative countries in the EU in the perception of gender appropriate roles for men and women: 48% of respondents agreed with the statement that fathers should prioritise their careers over family care and 51% believed that men are less competent at household tasks than women ([Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020](#)). Consequently, in the Slovak context, it seems that the flexibility stigma is stronger for men, which may be related to the very strong attachment to gender norms requiring men to be career-oriented breadwinners and prohibiting them to show feminine working patterns. In contrast, flexibility is seen as a positive and natural requirement for women; Slovak men seeking more flexibility could be considered poor workers because more work commitment is expected of them. This may exert pressure on men to conform to masculine gender norms and stereotypes that limit their human potential and impede their ability to balance work and family life ([Moss-Racusin et al., 2010](#)). Unless men are granted the freedom to take on more caring and household responsibilities, women will continue to incur disproportionate costs due to their dual roles ([Rudman and Mescher, 2013](#)). Understandably, if the labour market continues to punish men for family-oriented behaviour, they will be less supportive of policies aimed at achieving a more equal division of labour and home responsibilities between women and men.

Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the present study is that we could not fully disentangle the effects of absences caused by caregiving and leave-seeking, as absences were generally described as

being due to a series of factors. Consequently, participants may have subjectively linked greater absenteeism with ill health or disabilities rather than family duties. This limitation does not undermine our findings that such absences are tolerated more among women than men. Thus, the findings indicate that the *weakness* proscription (Rudman and Mescher, 2013) may apply to both men's psychological characteristics and physical stamina. Future research could delve deeper into this interesting aspect and investigate labour market discrimination from a disability angle.

Practical implications of the results

Our findings inform the debate about reducing the gender wage gap in Slovakia and the tacit promotion of gender disparities in the labour market. The study shows that women may be directly discriminated against in the form of lower salary offers by HR professionals. We, therefore, recommend greater pay transparency to protect women from being disadvantaged before beginning work. Starting salaries could be a legal requirement in job adverts, and companies could be obliged to produce regular salary reports for men and women in similar positions. The evaluation processes leading to compensation decisions should also be made transparent. The publication of official pay statistics and opportunities to compare salaries of similarly effective employees in similar jobs could limit discriminatory practices and empower women to either negotiate their pay or seek employment with companies with fairer pay practices.

The findings of the present study are relevant for all stakeholders interested in levelling the playing field in the labour market. As Goldin (2014) and Skewes *et al.* (2018) observed, markets disproportionately value masculine working patterns, which disadvantage all groups apart from conformist males. To avoid backlash and negative consequences for men and women, diversity should be promoted in the world of employment and family life, including disentangling family-friendly and mother-friendly policies. In pursuit of gender equality, it is important not only to support women in their professional careers but also to encourage and expect men to take on more roles traditionally ascribed to women (Croft *et al.*, 2014; Kray *et al.*, 2017). One way would be to promote paternity leave and role models of men successfully balancing career and family life. Another would be to show more support and praise for men who do show dedication to family life. Seeing more men in family-related roles is likely to foster greater social acceptance and understanding of men's need for a better work-life balance.

Finally, implicit biases are particularly dangerous, as they are seen as less worrying, which means actions to reduce implicit forms of discrimination may enjoy lower social support (Daumeyer *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, discrimination is likely to persist in tacit forms, preserving residual gender gaps in the labour market and family life. There are various measures that could be adopted to level the playing field for women and men, including affirmative action through political and organisational quotas, family-friendly policies and the gender-neutralising of childcare (Bertrand, 2018). Regardless of the strategy chosen, without actions directly aimed at the systematic removal of persistent gender stereotypes and biases, institutional support and policies are likely to be ineffective and progress towards equality of opportunity slow. Women and men will still shy away from counter-stereotypical behaviour to avoid punishment. In the absence of improved social acceptance of behaviours that run counter to gender norms, both women and men will continue to experience discriminatory practices in the labour market, and their choice portfolio will remain limited, with detrimental results for men, women and the entire economy.

Conclusions

Together with females' lower starting salaries, the backlash against family-oriented men may strengthen the comparative advantage of fathers in the labour market and thus induce women

to stay at home longer, look for more flexible employment in lower paid sectors or opt out of the labour market permanently after having children, thereby contributing to the raw gender wage gap and lower share of employed women. Apart from fairness considerations, if we assume that the talent pool is equally distributed among women and men, discriminatory practices that encourage women to opt out of the labour market thus limit market efficiency. One should also not overlook the observation by [Croft et al. \(2014\)](#) that a more egalitarian division of household chores between mothers and fathers raises girls' professional aspirations and may thus contribute to combatting gender biases related to the labour market. This shows that a more gender-neutral view of household chores and caring activities could encourage younger generations of girls and boys to pursue their aspirations without sacrificing their work-life balance.

Note

1. Imagine that your colleague is having surgery and is unable to work for a few weeks. Your task is to complete two of his unfinished tasks. The first task is to hire a regional manager for the winery with nationwide coverage. Your colleague has assessed all the CVs and made brief notes about each applicant. You are now going to choose the best applicant. We will show you the three CVs your colleague has shortlisted. You have to assess each applicant based on a few questions and at the end, you should select the one you think is most suitable.

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Task 1: assessment of applicants

Imagine your colleague is having surgery and is unable to work for a few weeks. Your task is to complete two of his unfinished tasks. The first task is to hire a regional manager for the winery with nationwide coverage. Your colleague has assessed all the CVs and made brief notes about each applicant. You are now going to select the best candidate. We will show you the three CVs your colleague has shortlisted (see [Figures A1–A3](#)). You have to assess each applicant based on a few questions, and at the end, you have to select the one you think is most suitable.



Ing. Anna Šmitalová / Ing. Ján Horváth*
Date of birth: 17.9.1984
Place of residence: Nitra
Email: anna.smitalova@gmail.com / jan.horvath@gmail.com*
Phone number: 0909/234 910

Education

- 2008, University of Economics in Bratislava: Marketing management

Work experience

- 11 years in the field
- 2016 – 2020 sales manager, a company with 250 employees
- 2009 – 2015 Head of Marketing, a company with 50 employees

Courses and workshops

- Risk Management Workshop
- Team building and motivation

Skills

- software (accounting, project management software, MS Office),
- communication skills
- critical thinking
- driving licence

Language skills

- English, B2
- German, A2

Interests

- Music, detective novels, travelling

Cover letter yes
References yes

Notes: *Name and email address are consistent with the experimental condition the participant was assigned to

Figure A1.
Top-ranking
applicant's CV



Ing. Zuzana Kováčová / Ing. Martin Nagy*
Date of birth: 23.4.1983
Place of residence: Nové Zámky
Email: zuzana.kovacova@gmail.com / martin.nagy@gmail.com*
Phone number: 0909/123 456

Education

- 2007, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra: Management

Work experience

- 10 years in the field
- 2016 – 2020 team manager, a team with 8 employees
- 2009 – 2013 store manager, branch with 10 employees

Courses and workshops

- Project Management Workshop

Skills

- software (MS Office),
- communication skills
- driving licence

Language skills

- English, B2

Interests

- Music, movies, dance

Cover letter yes

References no

Figure A2.
Middle-ranking
applicant's CV

Notes: *Name and email address are consistent with the experimental condition the participant was assigned to

	<p>Bc. Monika Vargová / Bc. Andrej Mlynár* Date of birth: 30.7.1985 Place of residence: Štupava Email: monika.vargova@gmail.com / andrej.mlynar@gmail.com* Phone number: 0909/876 543</p>
<u>Education</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2009, Pan-European University in Bratislava: Economics and business management
<u>Work experience</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8 years in the field• 2017 – 2019 store manager, a team of 5 employees• 2010 – 2014 office worker, advertising agency with 20 employees
<u>Courses and workshops</u>	--
<u>Skills</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• software (MS Office),• driving licence
<u>Language skills</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• English, A1
<u>Interests</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• travelling
<u>Cover letter</u>	no
<u>References</u>	no

Figure A3.
Bottom-ranking
applicant's CV

Notes: *Name and email address are consistent with the experimental condition the participant was assigned to

GM

Task 2: selecting employee to be fired

Your second task is to select one of the following employees for dismissal (see [Table A1](#)). The workforce is being reduced for economic reasons: due to the crisis and limited production, the company has to dismiss one of its employees. Your colleague has preselected six candidates. Your task is to recommend which one the company should dismiss.

Employee descriptions

Female*, 37 years old, 7 years with the company, frequent sick leave, caring for family members and absences

Male, 36 years old, 6 years with the company, some sick leave, caring for family members and absences

Male, 38 years old, 5 years with the company, frequent sick leave, caring for family members and absences

Female, 35 years old, 5 years with the company, some sick leave, caring for family members and absences

Female, 36 years old, 6 years with the company, virtually no sick leave, caring for family members and absences

Male, 37 years old, 7 years with the company, virtually no sick leave, caring for family members care and absences

Table A1.

List of employee descriptions in

Task 2 (selecting an employee to be fired)

Notes: *r The other half of the sample received the same list but with the opposite employee gender; all other characteristics remained constant. The order of employees was randomised

Please indicate why you selected that employee (an open question)

Appendix 2. Additional survey

We conducted an additional survey a couple of days after the present study. The aim of the survey was to explore whether the lower salary offered to women might be related to lower salary expectations in the relevant group of the female Slovak population.

Methods

Participants and design

A total of 387 adult Slovaks participated in the study; seven of them were excluded from the analysis because their answers were outliers. The final sample consisted of 380 participants (200 women) aged 18–74 ($M_{age} = 44.35$, $SD_{age} = 15.99$). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected by an external agency (chosen in an ESOMAR-compliant tender) through an online survey hosted on Qualtrics as part of another study unrelated to the present one.

Procedure and measurement

After reading and signing the informed consent form, the participants completed several questionnaires and tasks not related to the present study. We then asked them what their monthly income was and what salary they would be willing to accept for the vacancy in the main study.

Results

In our sample, women's income was significantly lower ($t = 2.326$, $p = 0.021$) than men's income. But women were willing to accept approximately the same salary as men – there were no significant differences in reservation wage for women and men (see [Table A2](#) for descriptive statistics for the additional survey).

Participants' characteristics	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Agents</i>					
Men	180	45.50	16.19	18	81
Women	200	43.31	15.78	18	74
<i>Monthly income*</i>					
Men	180	734.56	459.41	0	3,500
Women	200	628.83	426.64	0	3,000
<i>Starting salary^{ns}</i>					
Men	180	1,400.41	719.84	0	3,800
Women	200	1,270.93	698.26	1.5	4,000
<i>Salary after probation^{ns}</i>					
Men	180	1,638.63	845.07	0	4,500
Women	200	1,521.89	853.78	2	5,500

Notes: * ($t = 2.326$; $p = 0.021$); ^{ns}non-significant

Table A2.
Descriptive statistics
for the additional
survey

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