Inequality beneath the surface: a Belgian case study on structural discrimination in the workplace and the role of organizational structure, culture and policies

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Abstract

Purpose – The context of a long-standing research tradition, discrimination has emerged as a critical factor contributing to inequalities within the labor market. While existing studies have primarily focused on overt discrimination during the recruitment and selection process, influenced by biases, attitudes, or stereotypes, there remains a significant knowledge gap regarding discrimination within the workplace and its underlying structural dimensions. This article aims to address this gap by examining the impact of organizational culture, structure and policies on workplace discrimination, with a particular emphasis on women and ethnic minorities.

Design/methodology/approach – Utilizing a case study strategy centered around a Belgian branch of a multinational professional service agency, data was gathered through ten semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with employees representing various organizational levels.

Findings – The findings reveal that organizational culture, structure and policies may pose inherent risks in perpetuating discrimination throughout individuals’ professional trajectories. Furthermore, it becomes apparent that, albeit often unconscious, these elements exhibit biases against women and ethnic minorities.

Social implications – Given the unintentional nature of structural discrimination, it is crucial to foster increased awareness and understanding of these dynamics.

Originality/value – The originality of this research article lies in its focus on addressing a critical knowledge gap in the existing research tradition on discrimination in the labor market. While previous studies have primarily concentrated on overt discrimination during recruitment and selection, this article delves into the often overlooked area of discrimination within the workplace itself. It explores the intricate interplay of organizational culture, structure and policies in perpetuating discrimination, particularly against women and ethnic minorities. By utilizing a case study approach within a multinational professional service agency in Belgium, the research uncovers hidden biases and unconscious elements contributing to structural discrimination. This emphasis on understanding unintentional discrimination adds a novel dimension to the discourse on workplace inequalities.

Keywords Discrimination, Inequality, Workplace, Organizational structure, Organizational culture, Organizational policies

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Diversity and inclusion are important topics within organizations worldwide (Choi, 2017). Companies recognize the need for diversity policies and a diverse workforce in today’s multicultural and global society (Ohunakin et al., 2019). Consequently, there is a growing

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focus on developing inclusive policies to promote diversity within organizations (Kabat-Farr et al., 2020). Regulatory frameworks surrounding diversity, such as quota legislation which mandates that each gender [1] should be represented by at least one-third in the board of directors of publicly traded companies, also aim to increase gender diversity on boards of directors (Institute for the Equality of Women and Men, 2016). However, discrimination against women and ethnic minorities remains a significant issue in the workplace and society (Kartolo and Kwantes, 2019; Wozniak and MacNeill, 2020). Data from the Belgian Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities [UNIA] (2021) shows a rise in reports of discriminatory acts: they received 10,610 reports of suspected discriminatory acts in 2021, an increase of 12% compared to 2020. The same report (2021) indicates that a quarter of all cases pertain to work and employment.

Numerous studies have shown differential treatment based on gender and ethnic minority status in various countries and employment sectors (Baert, 2018; Verhaeghe and De Coninck, 2022). It is essential to comprehend these discriminatory practices as research has shown that (perceived) discrimination has a negative impact on individuals’ well-being (Hackett et al., 2020) and socioeconomic status (i.e., through factors like lower wages and fewer promotion opportunities) (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). A significant question in this context pertains to motivations behind discriminatory practices in the labor market (Koopmans et al., 2019). The most commonly proposed answer to this question posits that discrimination stems from deliberate choices and actions by individuals (Small and Pager, 2020). However, numerous researchers also recognize the existence of structural elements that perpetuate discrimination (Lim et al., 2022; Small and Pager, 2020). This is what is understood in the literature as structural discrimination. According to this perspective, unequal treatments are not solely the result of individual actions but connected to the ways that society and its institutions are structured (Small and Pager, 2020; Szanton et al., 2022). The significance of this structural element associated with (employment) discrimination is often overlooked in current research.

In this study, we aim to investigate the link between organizational dimensions and the perception of discrimination or unequal treatment in the workplace in a large organization in Belgium. In doing so, we apply Acker’s (1990, 2009) framework, adapting and extending its relevance to a non-U.S. context. The landscape of research on structural discrimination within organizations in Belgium remains notably underexplored. While Belgium has seen comprehensive studies addressing discrimination in realms such as recruitment and housing markets (Baert, 2018; Lippens et al., 2022; Verhaeghe and De Coninck, 2022), there exists a discernible gap when it comes to understanding the intricacies of structural discrimination within organizational settings. The limited attention underscores the need for dedicated investigations into how organizational dimensions contribute to the perception of discrimination or unequal treatment in the workplace. By addressing this void in the literature, our study aims to shed light on the unique dynamics at play within Belgian organizations, contributing valuable insights to the broader discourse on workplace equality and fostering a nuanced understanding of the organizational context in the Belgian landscape.

We will focus on three key organizational dimensions that have been identified as potential contributors to structural discrimination: organizational structure, organizational culture and organizational policies. To do so, we developed a case study of a multinational professional service company through ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with employees of this organization.

**Sociological perspectives on discrimination**

Discrimination in the labor market and organizational discrimination are two distinct concepts that require clarification. Discrimination in the labor market focuses on unequal treatment in the selection and recruitment process. Economics, psychology and sociology
have developed numerous approaches to investigate such practices (Lippens et al., 2022). Economics, in particular, has a long tradition of studying labor market discrimination using correspondence tests. Here, fictitious applications, identical except for a discriminatory characteristic (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religious belief), are sent in response to job vacancies (Baert, 2018). These experiments allow for the identification of discrimination based on specific characteristics (Baert, 2018). Results from such studies indicate that unequal treatment based on various discriminatory grounds remains a persistent issue in the current labor market (Baert, 2018; Fibbi et al., 2022; Neumark et al., 2016; Thijssen et al., 2020; Zschirnt and Ruedin, 2016). Two prominent explanatory mechanisms can be distinguished: taste-based discrimination and statistical discrimination (Lippens et al., 2022). At the same time, psychology seeks explanations and motivations for discrimination at the individual level (Lippens et al., 2022). Social identity theory, for example, emphasizes intergroup relations and individuals’ social identity within those groups (Hogg, 2016).

Sociological perspectives on discrimination differ from economic and psychological approaches, focusing more on structural elements associated with (employment) discrimination (Lippens et al., 2022). This aligns with the concept of organizational discrimination, which goes beyond the recruitment process and encompasses unequal opportunities and treatments. Unlike earlier theories, organizational discrimination is not solely driven by individual actions but also involves how an organization’s structure contributes to the discrimination of certain groups (Small and Pager, 2020). It is not merely about difficulties in finding employment but also about the systematic inequalities that minorities and vulnerable groups experience throughout their professional careers (Acker, 2009). Walter et al. (2017) suggest that policies, procedures, structures and the culture within an organization can systematically contribute to unequal outcomes for different groups, even though this is often unintended. Given the limited attention to organizational discrimination in the literature, gaining more insight into this concept is crucial.

**Structural discrimination in organizations**

Structural discrimination within organizations involves complex interactions among individual biases, policies and organizational structures and cultures (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). This can lead to various forms of discrimination such as unequal pay or promotion opportunities, lack of support from management and mistreatment by colleagues (Hebl et al., 2020). Given the complexity of this issue, a multifaceted perspective is crucial to understand the different elements and their interactions (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). The literature highlights three key elements in organizations that shape discrimination: organizational structure, culture and policies (Kuipers et al., 2018; Valkeneers et al., 2022).

**Organizational structure**

Organizational structure encompasses the distribution of work patterns among individuals, groups, departments, or business units (Kuipers et al., 2018). According to Valkeneers et al. (2022), it consists of elements such as the division of labor, departmental formation, hierarchical aspects and the degree of centralization or decentralization. Kuipers et al. (2018) further distinguish between the production structure, which focuses on task distribution and specialization and the governance structure, which deals with the allocation and organization of managerial activities, including centralization, decentralization and hierarchy.

Hierarchy is a fundamental element of organizational structure and is closely tied to the degree of centralization. It determines the allocation of decision-making authority within an organization (Valkeneers et al., 2022). In centralized decision-making, top management holds the majority of decision-making power, while decentralized organizations distribute decision-making authority more broadly among their members.
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making authority across different levels (Valkeneers et al., 2022). The hierarchical position within an organization influences an individual’s status, power and influence (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011). However, hierarchical structures can also contribute to status differences and inequalities within an organization (Wingfield and Alston, 2014).

The glass ceiling is a persistent example of inequality in organizational hierarchies, where women and minorities face barriers in advancing to top-level positions (Bertrand, 2018; Du et al., 2022). Despite progress, underrepresentation of women and minorities in executive roles is observed globally (Miller et al., 2018). This disparity exists even in sectors dominated by women, like healthcare and education (Budig, 2002). Ethnic minorities also experience underrepresentation in management and executive positions (Adamovic and Leibbrandt, 2022; Valkeneers et al., 2022). Acker (2009) terms these patterns as “inequality regimes” resulting from interlocking practices that sustain inequalities at all levels, including top management. Socio-cultural gender norms, organizational policies related to parental leave and flexible working hours, biased evaluations and limited promotional opportunities contribute to the glass ceiling (Acker, 1990; Adamovic and Leibbrandt, 2022; Bear, 2021; Du et al., 2022; Skiba, 2019).

Another example is the gender pay gap, which has decreased in many countries (Kunze, 2008), while the ethnic pay gap has remained stable (Bornstein, 2018). The pay gap continues to be a widely studied phenomenon and it consists of “explained” and “unexplained” components (Rotman and Mandel, 2023). The explained portion accounts for factors like education, work experience, performance and skills (Blau and Kahn, 2017; Kunze, 2008). However, this portion of the pay gap has decreased due to growing convergence in these criteria between genders and ethnic minority and majority groups (Goldin, 2014). This implies that the remaining pay gap mainly consists of unexplained differences. In the literature, this unexplained portion of the pay gaps is often used to indicate workplace discrimination (Kunze, 2008).

Organizational culture

Organizational culture is another crucial element of structural discrimination (Kartolo and Kwantes, 2019). Schneider et al. (2017) describe organizational culture as “the shared values and basic assumptions that explain why organizations do what they do and focus on what they focus on [. . .].” (p. 468). Similarly, Kim et al. (2022) describe it as deeply rooted patterns of norms, values and beliefs. This shared culture shapes the behaviors and expectations within the organization (Kartolo and Kwantes, 2019; Stammerski and Son Hing, 2015). The literature identifies two key components of organizational culture: shared values and informal behavioral norms (Brettel et al., 2015; Hildesheim and Sonnetag, 2020).

Shared values, as defined by Ajzen and Fishbein (1972), represent underlying assumptions that are taken for granted within a group or organization. These values are often maintained and rarely questioned (Hildesheim and Sonnetag, 2020), contributing to the persistence of organizational culture (Valkeneers et al., 2022). The beliefs of leaders and managers play a significant role in shaping these values (Ostroff et al., 2012) and the selection and socialization processes reinforce and maintain the prevailing culture (Valkeneers et al., 2022). This can result in shared values reflecting the beliefs of the dominant or majority group within the organization, creating a normative system that favors the majority and poses challenges for minority groups (Gorman and Mosseri, 2018; Um, 2023; Walter et al., 2017).

Informal behavioral norms, derived from shared values and beliefs, shape expected behaviors within an organization (Cooke and Szumal, 1993; Kartolo and Kwantes, 2019). These norms set standards and expectations for employees, such as the expectation to work long hours to earn recognition and advancement (Hebl et al., 2020; Um, 2023). However, such norms can disproportionately affect women due to societal expectations around caregiving responsibilities, limiting their career opportunities (Hebl et al., 2020; Juhn and McCue, 2017).
At the same time, these expectations can also hinder men and fathers from actively participating in household duties (Damaske et al., 2014).

**Organizational policy**

Institutional policies are considered a major cause of structural discrimination in the workplace (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Human resources (HR) policies, including employee compensation, performance management, promotion policies and leadership training, play a crucial role in career opportunities (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Transparent and unbiased policies regarding promotion procedures, performance management and flexible work options are crucial for ensuring equality and inclusivity (Hebl et al., 2020; Goldin, 2014).

Designing performance management and promotion policies is vital for employees’ career opportunities (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). It is crucial to critically examine how these processes are structured within organizations. Two key aspects are particularly important: establishing unbiased promotion criteria and formalizing promotion processes (Hebl et al., 2020; Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Clearly defining evaluation criteria and consistently applying them can reduce discrimination in performance evaluations and promotion opportunities (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Formalized and systematic HR processes result in better representation and equal opportunities for minority groups (Castilla, 2015). Additionally, it is important to critically examine the promotion criteria. Biased criteria, such as relying on “face time” as a key performance indicator (KPI), perpetuates discrimination against women as they often bear a disproportionate share of household and caregiving responsibilities (Glass, 2004; Juhn and McCue, 2017). Transparency in performance management processes is also crucial as it communicates expected behavior (Decramer and Audenaert, 2023) and allows for identification and addressing of irregularities, including structural discrimination (Caulfield, 2021). Transparent promotion processes contribute to an inclusive work environment where equal opportunities are ensured (Castilla, 2015). Leaders play a crucial role in implementing transparent performance management systems by building trust and possessing necessary skills and resources (Decramer and Audenaert, 2023).

**Data and methodology**

**Case selection**

We opted for a case study strategy through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Case studies are valuable for qualitative research as they allow for a deep analysis of complex contexts (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013; Yin, 2009). In this study, the focus was on the Belgian branch of a multinational professional service organization. While case studies have limitations in terms of generalizability, they provide comprehensive insights (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).

Ten one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted within the organization to gain a deeper understanding of its characteristics and factors related to discrimination. This method was chosen for its exploratory nature and ability to capture personal opinions and experiences (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Individual interviews were preferred over focus groups to encourage participants to freely express their thoughts on sensitive topics like discrimination. A topic guide based on the theoretical framework was developed to structure the interviews while allowing for individual interpretations and experiences (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). The operationalisation of case study strategy through interviews enabled a comprehensive exploration of structural discrimination in the workplace, considering both organizational factors and personal experiences. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the authors’ institutional ethical review board.
Respondent recruitment occurred in multiple phases. Initially, contact was made via email with twelve organizations active in Belgium to ask if they were interested in participating in the study. Five organizations responded, four of negatively. The limited and predominantly negative response suggests that discrimination within organizations remains a sensitive topic. One organization responded positively and provided us with contact information of someone within the organization’s ‘Diversity and Inclusion’ department. Subsequently, this individual served as the primary point of contact. The participating organization operates globally in the consultancy and audit sector. In Belgium, it has around ten branches, over 2,500 employees and an annual turnover of nearly 400 million euros. This positions the organization as one of the so-called Big Four professional services firms in Belgium. In the second phase of respondent recruitment, the research team collaborated with the organization’s contact person to identify eighteen potential participants for the study. Subsequently, the research team reached out to each participant directly via email to schedule an interview. Initially, five participants responded positively to the first email, and after sending a reminder, nine additional participants agreed to participate. However, four participants dropped out at the last minute due to other priorities, resulting in a total of ten interviews being conducted.

Data collection and analysis
The interviews began by explaining the research design (without directly mentioning discrimination) and obtaining informed consent from participants. We addressed concerns raised by participants and reassured them about the anonymity and confidentiality of the interview. The initial questions focused on introductory information (i.e., ‘What is your role at the organization?’). Subsequently, the three main organizational elements under study were discussed (sample questions: ‘How would you describe organization in three words?’; ‘What changes would you like to see in the organizational culture?’). The interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. With the consent of participants, most interviews were recorded. However, two out of ten participants declined to be recorded, so detailed notes were taken to reconstruct the content of those interviews. For participants who were not fluent in Dutch, interviews were conducted in English.

This study involved purposive sampling, focusing on participants who were employed at the organization under investigation. Gender and ethnic background were considered important variables related to discrimination and were taken into account during the selection process. However, respondents who did not belong to these discriminated groups were also included to allow for diverse perspectives. Maximum variation and heterogeneity were sought in other characteristics such as age, position, service line and tenure. The final sample consisted of ten participants, including four men and six women. Six participants belonged to an ethnic minority group, with five from European countries and one from Asia. The participants represented various positions within the organization, ranging from consultants to directors and had different lengths of tenure. To ensure anonymity while reporting the results, pseudonyms were assigned to each respondent. Further details on the demographic characteristics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

The data analysis process consisted of several steps. Firstly, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Open coding was then performed, involving the assignment of labels or codes to relevant segments within each interview (Benaquisto, 2008; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Consistent labels were used across all interview transcripts to break down the raw data. Next, axial coding was employed to abstract central categories, concepts, or codes and create additional structure within the coding framework (Benaquisto, 2008; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). This allowed for the creation of data matrices that included key quotes from each respondent for each category. Finally, selective coding was conducted, resulting in more refined and central categories (Benaquisto, 2008; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013).
Results

In what follows, we discuss the main findings. During the interviews, respondents highlighted several significant themes related to the organizational culture, structure and policy in structural inequalities within the organization. The themes that emerged revolved around (a) prevailing expectations and challenges, (b) women’s advancement opportunities, (c) the hierarchical structure of the organization, (d) promotion policies and decision-making processes and (e) language barriers.

a) Expectations and challenges

Participants highlighted the exceptionally high performance expectations imposed by the current organizational culture. Robin expressed that it is “always expected that you go the extra mile. If someone asks you to do x, you never do just x.” This mindset results in a significant workload and long working days. Irregular working hours and overtime are common, particularly for senior employees. Moreover, participants mentioned that they rarely or never report overtime and do not receive compensation for it. Employees and supervisors do not question this arrangement, as evidenced by Alex’s remark: “In the past year, I’ve worked almost every weekend [. . .] to be honest. It’s normal here to work twelve to fourteen-hour days.”

However, many participants emphasized the challenges they face in meeting these expectations and maintaining a health work-life balance. Bo expressed their struggle: “I wouldn’t even dare to start the washing machine or empty the dishwasher at home because I should actually be working. So, for me, it was a matter of finding the right balance.” Some participants critically observed that these factors contribute to colleagues experiencing burnout and, ultimately, deciding to leave the organization. This was supported by Sam, the HR director, who revealed that a significant number of employees leave the organization. The turnover rate in the organization is approximately 20–30% annually, higher than the average turnover rate in Belgian organizations in 2021–8% (Securex, 2022).

Although this is an overarching problem for many employees, its outcomes are not the same for everyone. Women – mothers specifically – found this culture to be exceptionally challenging. Robin states that, “In certain phases of your life, it may be impossible to meet the standards and expectations set by organization. For example, as a woman, when you want to have children, it can be too much pressure to simultaneously meet the expectations.” The fact that these challenges disproportionately affect women and mothers results in a high turnover rate among these groups. Sam acknowledges that, as an organization, they “lose many women too early” and that “it’s mainly mothers that we lose.”
b) Women’s advancement opportunities

Participants acknowledged the presence of a glass ceiling within the organization, with a disproportionate number of women leaving and a lower representation of women in senior positions and top management. Bo succinctly expressed this sentiment, stating, “The glass ceiling, it’s there. I’m not going to make it difficult.” Renee stated the following:

At some point along the way, a significant number of women are falling through the cracks. So much so that the balance completely shifts. When these women were hired, they also had all the talents and competencies to succeed. So, it’s not because of that (. . .) you feel that something is not right there.

The structural problem of gender inequality within the organization can be attributed to three main factors: the “up or out” culture, flexible work policies and the gender pay gap. These exist at the organizational structure, cultural and policy level.

1) Up or out culture

In an “up or out” culture, employees are pushed to advance in their careers (i.e., up) or leave the organization (i.e., out) (Kossek et al., 2017). Gust, a manager, suggested that there may be better alternatives available on the job market for those who want to remain at a certain level without the ambition of upward mobility. Various participants indicated that the “up or out” mentality creates an environment where employees are encouraged to constantly improve their skills. Alex stated:

It’s an environment where you are under pressure and expected to grow immediately.

2) Flexible work policy

The challenges of the “up or out” culture can be mitigated by flexible work policies. While participants initially perceived a high degree of flexibility in (tele)working options, a closer examination revealed limitations in the organization’s flexible work policies. Bo highlighted that employees are contractually required to be physically present at the office for at least three days a week. Additionally, the mandatory reservation of seats or desks was seen by some as a measure to monitor employee presence. Robin said:

I think this is also to be able to check who comes to the office when and whether everyone is present for at least three days a week.

Participants also indicated that they recognize the importance of physical presence at the office to create opportunities for themselves. Otis says:

Competence is important, but you also need visibility. (. . .) Let’s be honest, if there’s a position open for the next level and a choice has to be made (. . .), they will choose the person with more visibility, even if the other person has better skills.

Management recognizes the significance of physical presence at work as a criterion for evaluating employees, although they acknowledge the negative impact it can have, especially for mothers. Sam, HR director, expressed a desire to “focus less on presenteeism and more on potential and competence.” Initially, participants spoke positively about the freedom to organize their workday, with Robin mentioning that “the mantra is that as long as the work is done, it doesn’t really matter.” However, participants also revealed that everyone must be available between 10a.m. and 5p.m. and complete a minimum of 38 h per week on their time sheets, indicating limited flexibility despite perceptions.

The combination of the (in)flexible work policy and the “up or out” culture contributes to an underrepresentation of women in senior positions, leading to a lack of role models for
ambitious women and further complicating efforts to break this cycle. Sam acknowledged these challenges:

Are we there yet? No. Are we working towards it? Yes. Will it take a long time? Yes. Is it challenging? Yes. Does that mean we are not open enough to it? Maybe (sigh) maybe.

3) Gender pay gap

The overrepresentation of men in top positions compared to women partially explains the disparity in average earnings between genders. However, there are still unexplained differences in wages between men and women that cannot be accounted for by factors such as education, experience, or performance. The issue of the gender pay gap was spontaneously raised during interviews, with Jules expressing the belief that she was a victim of wage discrimination:

They didn’t offer me a salary increase or bonus. He [her partner] said, ‘Due to indexing, you won’t get a salary raise.’ But I think this isn’t true for others; they got a raise and indexing.

Robin also raised concerns about potential wage discrimination, speculating that it could be influenced by both gender and ethnic origin:

I think they may have thought with the allochthonous girl, let’s aim as low as possible, while the Belgian guy could exert more pressure […] but I’m not sure.

c) Hierarchical structure

The limited opportunities for women to advance are not only influenced by the organizational culture but also by its structure. While nearly all respondents acknowledged a strict hierarchical structure within the organization, top management held a different perspective. Sam, HR director, the current hierarchy is perceived as having “a very flat structure” and is more focused on “different levels of competences” rather than a specific hierarchical order.

1) Ivory tower

The perception of a flat structure was not shared by other employees, although some noted changes taking place. Bo stated:

I find it very hierarchical. […] It’s still a bit like the management is in their ivory tower, but less so than before. Steps are being taken.

The concept of the ivory tower is relevant in understanding structural discrimination, specifically in relation to management. It refers to a situation where those in privileged positions, such as management, have limited knowledge of and show little involvement in the needs and challenges faced by employees outside their position of privilege. This seclusion, coupled with elitism and privileges, creates a lack of awareness regarding the realities of others. Due to their relative seclusion, individuals in top management are not exposed to diverse experiences and opinions. This lack of exposure is evident within the organization, as Robin stated:

Their [management] views and ideas are fixed, and they are often not willing to change. When you raise certain issues, they simply don’t listen to you.

To understand the discrimination aspect, it is crucial to examine the socio-cultural composition of top management. Participants consistently described the group of directors
and partners as significantly older compared to other levels. This was attributed to the requirement of a certain level of experience and expertise for these positions. Additionally, there was a strong belief among participants that women are underrepresented in top management roles. Jules said that “you can probably count the women on one hand.” Ethnic diversity also appeared limited in top management positions. Alex summarized this:

80% men and 20% women (. . .) people between 50 and 60 years old, so they have more experience (. . .) they are Flemish. A few international partners, but only a few. (. . .) Very boring!

2) Old boys network

The quotes and observations reveal the presence of a relatively homogeneous group of men in top management, resembling the characteristics of an old boys network. These networks consist of individuals from the same socio-cultural background and can lead to limited diversity and unequal opportunities for other – non-privileged – groups who are (informally) excluded from such networks. This pattern is present within the organization as well. According to Alex, the partners have “their own network” and “managers are not involved in partner conversations.”

The closed nature of the old boys network makes it difficult for outsiders to break into it. Robin emphasized that “you have to be a certain type of person to reach a certain level [partner].” The participants confirmed the inaccessibility of this group. Bo stated that it is not expected for those lower in the hierarchy to engage in conversations with partners, while Alex found it “difficult as a manager to connect with people in partner and executive director positions.” This creates a seemingly impenetrable system that resists change and perpetuates the existing network. Consequently, underrepresented groups like women and ethnic minorities face significant challenges in entering and benefiting from these networks.

d) Promotion policies and decision-making processes

Promotion policies are another important factor contributing to workplace discrimination, in addition to culture and structure. Performance management, as described by Decramer and Audenaert (2023), generally involves three stages: setting objectives, ongoing monitoring and feedback and performance evaluation, which can lead to rewards such as bonuses or promotions.

1) Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Clear objectives and transparent communication about KPIs are crucial for fair evaluations and equal opportunities in promotion policies. However, the interviews revealed a lack of clarity in these areas within the organization. Robin expressed her frustration, stating that it was “certainly not always clear” to her. The HR director, Sam, also acknowledged the need for improvement, stating that “[t]here are both KPIs and descriptions of expectations and objectives at a certain level (. . .). Can it be improved? Yes, the process can be made more transparent.” In addition to clear communication about KPIs, formulating objectives and expectations that align with individual roles and responsibilities is equally important. However, some participants felt the organization falls short in this regard. Otis mentioned that “I want a clear path (. . .) It’s not about progressing from manager 1 to 2 (. . .) and the goals you need to achieve for that. It’s up to them [the organization] to tell me which path I can follow, and this is not 100% clear.” This lack of clarity is particularly challenging for employees facing additional barriers, such as ethnic minorities. Jules, for instance, believed that “you can’t be evaluated with someone with the same skills because of the language barrier.”
2) Role of the supervisor

Clear and transparent feedback on performance is crucial in preventing structural discrimination in the promotion process. The organization’s top management emphasizes a “culture of continuous feedback and coaching”, according to Sam. However, the implementation of this feedback process remains unclear. The role of supervisors, who are referred to as counsellors within the organization, is crucial in providing feedback and guidance (Decramer and Audenaert, 2023). Renee explained that “[e]veryone who works with us has a counselor. You have conversations with this counselor about your performance: What is going well? What needs improvement? What do you need? What are your goals? (. . .) We discuss all of that.” However, participants had diverse opinions about these counselors. While many expressed satisfaction with the system, they also acknowledged the variability in counselor quality. Robin stated that “I’m lucky to have such a good counselor (. . .) and I see a lot of differences among colleagues in other service lines. Sometimes there is much less communication or transparency (. . .) and I see employees leaving the organization because of this.”

3) Decision-making

Transparency in decision-making, particularly in the promotion process, is particularly important alongside clear objectives and feedback. Bo, who had the longest tenure out of all participants, stated that “the openness from top management and transparency in the company have increased compared to the past, but there is still work to be done.” Noa also expressed the desire for more transparency in communication throughout the organization. The main concern regarding promotion is the lack of transparency and the factors considered. In this context, Renee pointed out the following:

“I believe that the procedure of the performance cycle is very transparent . . . What happens afterward or what the underlying factors are, there is less transparency about that. Who ultimately decides, based on what, how are comparisons made, is there coordination between different departments? I wouldn’t dare to say.”

In other words, there is insufficient transparency regarding these aspects. Participants also indicated that the justification for the final decision is heavily relies on individual managers. Bo, who is also a counselor, explained:

“I don’t know how it is for others and how others do it, but personally, I value transparency a lot. I will always schedule a conversation with each counselee about the decision that was made and the reasons given for it.”

She further added that she is an “atypical people manager” who wants “everyone to be able to grow at their own pace.” Transparency in decision-making extends beyond promotions and includes other decisions that impact employee development opportunities. However, the interviews revealed that transparency is not always effectively communicated in these cases either. Noa provided an example:

“I was working on a project, and suddenly, without explanation, I was reassigned to another project . . . It’s okay to make these kinds of shifts, but what I would appreciate is understanding the context behind this decision. Why was this decision made?”

e) Language barriers

The language barrier within the organization emerged as an additional issue, particularly for participants belonging to ethnic minority groups who have not fully mastered the native
language, Dutch. Jules stated that “there are always cultural differences” and that “the language barrier, in particular, is very challenging.” Max and Noa also mentioned that not having full command of the language can pose difficulties in fully integrating into the team. Max expressed feeling like she was “part of something but not completely.” To address this issue, structural solutions such as language support or language training can be implemented to ensure that non-native speakers have equal opportunities and can fully participate in the organization. However, the interviews also revealed some pain points within the organization concerning both culture and policies, suggesting that further improvements may be needed.

1) Formal language policy

The organization’s formal language policy was found to be a significant factor in the manifestation of the language barrier. Concerns were raised about the organization’s support for non-native speakers, and some policy initiatives aimed at addressing this issue were mentioned. However, participants felt that these measures, such as bi-weekly language classes, often missed their target audience and only benefited those with some language proficiency. They suggested more effective measures, including financial support for professional language classes and a better understanding of the unique challenges faced by non-native speakers. Jules expressed her perspective:

I don’t mind having to learn the language, really, I just feel that the organization does not provide enough resources to help us with this. In that sense, they are not inclusive.

The lack of support for non-native speakers becomes particularly problematic when language proficiency becomes a criterion for accessing opportunities. Jules stated that she has “no access to equal opportunities – both internally and externally – because of the language.” Participants expressed that internal initiatives and activities often exclude non-native speakers due to them being organized in Dutch, and language skills are also frequently considered when assigning employees to projects or clients. Alex, for instance, knows that he is not considered for certain assignments because he doesn’t speak the official languages of Belgium, Dutch or French. The issue of language proficiency raises a fine line between justified discrimination and rejection. Some participants believed that lacking language skills justified not being assigned certain tasks, while non-native speakers felt rejected despite possessing the necessary skills. Jules described this as a challenging cycle to break:

If I don’t get local clients and keep working on international projects ( . . ), I won’t come into contact with the language ( . . ). I can’t learn the language during working hours because I don’t have access to it for whatever reason. And that becomes a vicious cycle.

The language barrier also poses a risk of non-native speakers being primarily evaluated based on their language proficiency rather than their other professional skills, which hinders their chances of promotion or career advancement. Jules questioned “what the organization does to evaluate employees who do not speak the language fairly.” Participants felt that the organization has taken limited proactive action to address this issue, with insufficient initiatives to support and guide non-native employees in overcoming the language barrier.

2) Informal language culture

The language barrier extends beyond formal policies and has a profound impact on the organizational culture. Jules reflected how the language barrier is “everywhere, it comes from the top, and everyone behaves accordingly because it’s the norm.” This cultural aspect leads to the exclusion of non-native speakers from social activities and informal networks. Max emphasized the feeling of being an outsider for those who do not understand the language.
Jules expressed frustration, stating, “*I’m tired of always having to adapt. I don’t belong.*” Even employees who speak the local languages acknowledged the challenges faced by non-native speakers, with Robin noting that language barriers can result in exclusion during everyday situations like lunchtime conversations: “*If you’re having lunch and you don’t understand a word of what’s being said (…), it can lead to the exclusion of some people.*” The organizational culture significantly influences informal interactions among employees and groups, making it difficult for non-native speakers to connect during team-building activities and networking events. Jules shared the struggle of feeling unable to establish meaningful connections, leading to demotivation and a sense of being disconnected. Similarly, Max highlighted the challenges of connecting with colleagues and feeling integrated within the team and the company as a non-Dutch speaker: “*If I spoke Dutch, I would have a different level of integration within the team and the company.*”

These testimonials underscore the importance of addressing language barriers and promoting inclusion, understanding and interaction among minority groups. It is crucial to create a culture that values language diversity and fosters a sense of involvement and respect for all employees, regardless of their language skills. This requires leaders to actively nurture an inclusive mindset, a responsibility that is currently not adequately fulfilled within the organization, as revealed by Jules’s testimony:

> “I have lunch with them [the team], and my partner speaks in Dutch, so I obviously can’t follow. He knows I don’t speak Dutch, he knows I’m learning, and yet he doesn’t switch to English even once. Or at least try to summarize what he just said.”

**Discussion**

This study shows that organizational structure, culture and policies are perceived by employees and managers to potentially contribute to workplace discrimination. These elements were perceived to contribute to a system that perpetuates discrimination against certain social groups, both formally and informally.

**Organizational structure: hierarchy and leadership**

Respondents indicate that the organization is hierarchical, which poses risks of structural discrimination against women and ethnic minorities (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008; Wingfield and Alston, 2014). Hierarchical structures often result in increasing levels of status, power and influence as one moves higher in the hierarchy (Bunderson and Reagan, 2011). The interviews highlight a perception of management in an ivory tower, disconnected from the experiences of underrepresented groups. Upward feedback is limited and managers are perceived as holding fixed views. Studies stress the importance of inclusive leadership styles to address structural discrimination (Adams *et al*., 2020). These styles prioritize interaction, dialogue and actively seeking feedback from employees (Randel *et al*., 2018). Without inclusive leadership, there is a risk of perpetuating structural discrimination and favoring the majority group over equal opportunities.

The composition of the leadership group is an important factor and participants overwhelmingly describe a homogeneous group consisting mainly of highly educated, Flemish men. This aligns with the concept of an “*old boys network*” (Allemand *et al*., 2022) and contributes to the segregation in social and professional networks within the organization. This aligns with studies showing significant segregation in social and professional networks (Marsden *et al*., 2020). Segregation is problematic as professional networks and connections are essential forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Participants recognize the importance of having a broad network for professional opportunities. Segregated networks can perpetuate inequalities for underrepresented
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groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, to maintain the privileged position of the majority group (Acker, 2009).
Instances of wage discrimination and the presence of a glass ceiling within the organization are mentioned by participants as examples (Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008). Respondents mentioned instances of wage discrimination where employees in the position experience an unexplained wage gap. This unexplained portion could be an indication of discrimination (Kunze, 2008; Rotman and Mandel, 2023). The glass ceiling is also evident, reflecting the systemic inequalities faced by women and ethnic minorities (Acker, 1990, 2009; Broadbridge and Hearn, 2008; Kossek et al., 2017). Participants acknowledged the underrepresentation of these groups in senior positions, despite their presence in lower levels. The hierarchical structure and exclusion from professional networks contribute to the limited advancement of women and ethnic minorities (Wingfield and Alston, 2014). These elements contribute to inequality regimes, where the privileged position of the established majority group is maintained (Acker, 2009).

Organizational culture: up or out culture and the importance of language proficiency
The current research also examines how the prevailing organizational culture contributes to structural discrimination. Culture refers to shared values, behavioral norms and expectations (Brettel et al., 2015; Cooke and Szumal, 1993; Hildesheim and Sonnetag, 2020). An important term that emerges is the “up or out” culture where employees are pressured to rapidly advance professionally (Kossek et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that unpaid overtime and long working hours are considered implicit and normal. This indicates the internalization of prevailing values, norms and expectations by members of the organization. Organizations actively seek employees who align with the prevailing culture and hold the same values, which often reflects the beliefs of the majority group (Gorman and Mosseri, 2018; Valkeneers et al., 2022). Walter et al. (2017) argue that this acceptance of norms can unintentionally disadvantage underrepresented groups. Participants acknowledge that current expectations can be particularly challenging for certain groups, notably mothers. This draws a clear parallel with the literature: the expectation that employees spend long hours at the office to “earn” professional growth is a classic example of discriminatory behavioral norms (Hebl et al., 2020; Um, 2023). Such expectations are inherently discriminatory because women, even today, shoulder a disproportionate burden of household work compared to men (Juhn and McCue, 2017; Thébaud and Taylor, 2021).

Language is another cultural element mentioned. Ethnic minority participants indicate experiencing barriers or obstacles due to the dominant language (Dutch) within the company. According to participants, the language barrier exists at two levels: informal language culture and formal language policies. The informal language culture refers to how the majority group interacts with employees who do not (sufficiently) master the language and this is strongly influenced by the organization’s culture. Once again, the culture primarily reflects the interests and beliefs of the majority group (i.e., French and Dutch speakers) (Gorman and Mosseri, 2018). Many researchers argue that this makes it particularly difficult for minority groups to feel at home (Gorman and Mosseri, 2018). This is also confirmed by the participants. Several respondents indicate that they do not feel at home within the organization, feel like “outsiders,” and have difficulties establishing (in)formal connections with colleagues.

Organizational policy: key performance indicators, visibility and formalization
Lastly, we shed light on organizational policies and their potential contribution to or mitigation of structural discrimination. Specifically, we focus on the promotion process and the role of supervisors. Two important factors in the promotion process are the establishment of neutral evaluation criteria and formalized procedures (Pager and Shepherd, 2008).
Respondents acknowledge that the organization formulates evaluation criteria or KPIs. However, these criteria may not always be neutral. Language becomes a significant issue as the organization fails to support non-native speakers in overcoming language-related obstacles faced by ethnic minorities. This lack of neutrality and inclusivity in the policy affects performance evaluations, where language can become a criterion for accessing opportunities (Hebl et al., 2020).

Visibility within the organization also emerges as a crucial aspect, reflecting the previous discussion on face time as an evaluation criterion. Physical presence is used as an indication of performance and evaluation, which poses risks. Employees who bear significant caregiving and household responsibilities (i.e., women and especially mothers) may miss out on opportunities despite being equally productive (Glass, 2004; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). This exemplifies how promotion criteria may be (un)consciously biased in favor of the dominant group in the workplace (i.e., men) (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021). Flexible work policies have been shown to offer potential solutions (Ansari et al., 2016), providing equal opportunities for professional growth by allowing employees to adapt their work hours (Ansari et al., 2016). However, participants highlight several aspects that indicate a relatively rigid policy, such as mandatory physical presence, required availability between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m. and the lack of schedule autonomy. Therefore, a critical examination of existing evaluation criteria is necessary to ensure greater neutrality in the future, fostering an equal, diverse and inclusive workplace where all employees can access the same opportunities (Hebl et al., 2020).

In addition to formulating neutral evaluation criteria, the formalization of promotion processes is crucial (Pager and Shepherd, 2008). Research suggests that formalized processes can address structural discrimination in performance management and policies (Hebl et al., 2020; Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). Consistently applying ideally neutral evaluation criteria is key to avoiding structural discrimination (Stamarski and Son Hing, 2015). It is important to note the pivotal role of supervisors in this process, as the success of a promotion policy relies on their implementation (Decramer and Audenaert, 2023). However, the interviews reveal that this implementation does not always proceed smoothly and participants express differing experiences with their supervisors. This implies a lack of formalized processes with limited feedback and supervision from the HR department. Such observations may have consequences in terms of structural discrimination (Hebl et al., 2020).

Strengths and limitations
The chosen research design and obtained results should be considered in light of some important limitations associated with the methodology. Qualitative research, while offering numerous advantages, also has limitations. One key limitation is the limited sample size, making it challenging to generalize the findings. With only one in twelve organizations that were contacted agreeing to participate, the sample does not fully represent the diversity of organizational cultures, structures and policies across the broader landscape. Additionally, within the participating organization, the interview sample size constituted ten employees, chosen from a potential pool of twenty-five hundred. This limited subset may introduce a potential bias, as those who agreed to participate might have distinct perspectives or experiences compared to non-participants. Therefore, conducting quantitative research on structural discrimination within organizations would provide a broader understanding. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that this is a case study, yielding context-specific results. Nevertheless, the empirical research findings can still offer valuable insights for future studies in diverse contexts.

The use of semi-structured in-depth interviews necessitates critical reflection. It is essential to recognize that all results are based on subjective perceptions, experiences and
insights of the participants. They interpret and respond to questions from their unique perspectives, requiring caution in interpreting the results. It is also important to consider possible interviewer effects, where the characteristics or attributes of the researcher may influence what respondents are willing or unwilling to share. The interviews were conducted by a female researcher and participants who are victims of discrimination might be less hesitant to share their experiences compared to if the researcher had strong similarities with the dominant group. Conversely, respondents may be more cautious and hesitant to express their opinions, aligning their answers with what they believe the researcher’s beliefs are (i.e., social desirability).

Finally, the multifaceted perspective on structural discrimination explored in this research presents both a challenge and a strength. On one hand, it poses a challenge in capturing the complex nature of organizations comprehensively—encompassing culture, structure and policies in a single study is difficult. Each of these elements can be the subject of research on discrimination and focusing on one element allows for a more in-depth understanding but sacrifices certain nuances. On the other hand, this comprehensive view of structural discrimination is the primary strength of the current research. The study attempts to consider the complex interactions between different organizational characteristics and how they contribute to discrimination. Organizational culture, structure and policies are interconnected and mutually shape each other.

Note
1. Although we acknowledge that gender is a continuum rather than binary, gender quota legislation only distinguishes between men and women.

References


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