

Levelling The Playing Field: Leveraging AI-Driven Recruitment to Mitigate Motherhood Discrimination

Ms. Chaitali Wadhwa

Research Scholar, School of Law, Manav Rachna University, chaitali@mru.edu.in

Dr. Shaharyar Asaf Khan

Professor, School of Law, manav Rachna university, shaharyarasafkhan@mru.edu.in

Abstract:

Motherhood discrimination remains a persistent issue in workplaces worldwide, with women often facing biases, unfair treatment, and limited career opportunities due to their reproductive and caregiving responsibilities. Despite legal protections, working mothers continue to face significant biases and barriers in hiring, promotion, and training. This research explores the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to mitigate this form of gender bias. The authors establish the relationship between gendered roles and the public-private dichotomy that has fostered the growth of pregnancy and motherhood discrimination in the workplace. The paper further analyses how AI can be leveraged to create a fairer hiring and promotion landscape. It discusses the potential applications of AI in resume screening and job interview analysis. The paper also identifies the potential algorithmic biases associated with the use of AI to mitigate motherhood discrimination and addresses the ethical considerations and potential limitations of using AI for this purpose. The significance of this paper lies in bridging the gap between traditional anti-discrimination strategies and cutting-edge technological interventions to provide new insights and strategies to tackle discriminatory practices against working mothers, which has far-reaching consequences for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole. The findings suggest that while AI holds promise for reducing overt discrimination, significant challenges remain in addressing more subtle biases and ensuring AI systems themselves do not perpetuate existing inequities.

Keywords: Motherhood Discrimination, Gender Equality, Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Bias, Workplace Recruitment

Introduction

Gender discrimination is a significant barrier to workplace equality. It may take the form of unequal employment opportunities, discrepancies in wages, differential treatment, variations in behavior and communication, choice-based roles and projects, denial of promotions, and variable importance given to men over women at the workplace (Nuseir et al., 2021). The glass ceiling is a persistent barrier faced by women in the workplace. Organizations seem to have a pattern of promoting mostly male employees to managerial positions. This suggests that female employees are overlooked for these opportunities regardless of their qualifications. Furthermore, managers appear to hold the stereotype that women are incapable of handling challenging tasks. This bias and a general lack of trust in female employees' abilities create a significant barrier to their advancement within the company. Existing laws and regulations often struggle to address this discrimination's subtle and subjective nature.

Added to the existing gender discrimination is another layer of biases faced by working mothers, i.e. pregnancy discrimination or the unfavorable treatment of women based on pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions. The *maternal wall* is a persistent barrier

faced by working mothers in the workplace. This metaphor refers to the invisible obstacles that prevent women with children from reaching leadership positions (Cheung et al., 2022). This barrier stems from the unequal perception employers hold towards mothers. They often stereotype mothers as less dedicated to their careers and a less profitable investment for the company. This biased perception unfairly limits working mothers' advancement opportunities and often forces them to choose between motherhood and career progression. Despite global efforts to promote gender equality and tackle discriminatory practices, the persistence of differential treatment against working mothers has continued to be a common phenomenon. On the one hand, gendered roles and attached stereotypes have flourished, but on the other hand, the widespread use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems is a mark of the growth and advancement of an otherwise traditional society. AI applications are an important part of everyday lives at both institutional and individual levels. They are being inculcated in the hiring and promotion processes for resume screening, candidate evaluation, and the identification of skills and experiences that align with job requirements. By addressing the issues surrounding motherhood discrimination with the possible solution of the evolution of algorithms designed to mitigate biases, this research explores the potential of AI in preventing pregnancy and motherhood discrimination at work. Integrating AI systems in hiring and promotion practices may provide working mothers with opportunities that are available to their counterparts, irrespective of their parental status. This is imperative for the promotion of equality and fostering an inclusive workplace. Unbiased hiring and promotion practices can lead to greater diversity, giving women a platform to climb the ladders of success and accelerate their career growth. Using AI to push women to break the glass ceiling can positively influence organizational performance by fostering a culture of innovation and creativity.

However, with the rapid growth of these systems, there is also an increasing possibility that the applications may be implicit with biases, which affect the outcome of important decisions. The authors recognise that technology is not immune to bias and address these to ensure that AI systems do not perpetuate or exacerbate existing inequalities. While advocating for the use of artificial intelligence during recruitment, the authors simultaneously attempt to provide insights into the emergence of algorithmic biases and strategies to rectify them. By integrating insights from current research with an evaluation of technological solutions, this work seeks to provide actionable suggestions for organisations to mitigate discrimination effectively.

Aim and Significance

The authors aim to address the issue of workplace discrimination, with a specific focus on gender and pregnancy-related bias. Building on the foundation of the gender roles and motherhood penalty, the authors explore the emerging role of artificial intelligence in preventing discriminatory practices during recruitment and decision-making processes.

The significance of this research lies in its multifaceted approach, bridging the gap between traditional anti-discrimination strategies and cutting-edge technological interventions. While existing research focuses either on the application of AI or motherhood discrimination, the present study integrates the two seemingly distant areas of research to provide new insights and strategies to tackle this persistent challenge, which has far-reaching consequences for individuals, organisations, and society as a whole.

Gender roles in the public-private dichotomy

Gender discrimination, loosely explained, is the differential treatment or biases amongst individuals who are alike in all aspects except their gender. Gender discrimination is not a new phenomenon; it is as old as civilisation itself. Men and women have traditionally been associated with certain specific tasks on the pretext that there exists a sexual division of labor. This division confines women to domestic and household work, while men are expected to put their careers first (Berdahl & Moon, 2013). The division—termed the public-private dichotomy—entrusts men with civic society's responsibilities, such as political participation, governance, business, economic activities, law, and governance – all elements of the public sphere. On the other hand, women are given the tag of homemakers and are expected to take care of the elders and children of the house, cook and clean, do domestic household chores, and look after other related household activities. The household is seen as the private sphere, as it has the character of a family (Thornton, 1991).

The public-private dichotomy is deeply rooted in the social contract theory, which historically relegated women to private, domestic roles, allowing men to occupy the public sphere with greater freedom. Men perceive the domestic sphere as a space for personal privacy, whereas women experience it as a sphere of constraint and oppression. This dichotomy manifests differently for both sexes, with men's dominance in the public sphere often being mirrored by women's subjugation in the private sphere. The secondary status of women has historically enabled the dominant status of men, typically in the order of men over women. This dichotomy perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces patriarchal norms, limiting the opportunities and agency of women in both the public and private spheres.

The traditional distribution of gender roles, transmitted from generation to generation, finds justification in the presence or absence of strength. Women are confined to the four walls of the household because they are seen to be more caring and nurturing. The conventional notions of “family” in a heteronormative household have exacerbated this stereotype, clearly establishing hierarchies of the gendered division of labor in a patriarchal setup. Consequently, women’s contribution is restricted only to “reproductive labor”, equated to having non-labor intensive and having low-status (Sarti et al., 2018). Karl Marx also argued that domestic work and reproductive labor do not have the characteristics to fall within the ambit of social labor because they do not produce commodities that serve an “economically useful purpose.” In his opinion, reproductive labor is only good for creating resources and maintaining the strength of waged workers.

The public-private dichotomy has significant implications for gender roles and responsibilities. It reinforces gender stereotypes and limits the opportunities available to women. The confinement of women to the private sphere is widely regarded as oppressive (Friedan, 1963). Social institutions, being a reflection of social relations, also play a crucial role in shaping individuals according to socially accepted norms. The notion that women are warmer and more empathetic often comes with the assumption that they lack rationality, thereby denying them the same rights and privileges granted in a liberal economy. This perception limits their status to that of a caregiver, reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating gender inequalities (Hein, 2005).

Motherhood discrimination in the workplace

The cultural constraint of gender, which posits that women inherently desire or need children to feel fulfilled, is deeply intertwined with the notion that women are warmer and more empathetic. This stereotype often comes with the assumption that women lack rationality, thereby denying them the same rights and privileges granted in a liberal economy. This perception limits their status to that of a caregiver, reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating gender inequalities. The idea that women are naturally nurturing and maternal is used to justify their confinement to domestic roles, further solidifying their secondary status in society. This cultural constraint not only restricts women's choices and opportunities but also reinforces the notion that their primary value lies in their reproductive capabilities rather than their intellectual or professional abilities. As a result, women are often relegated to a narrow range of roles and expectations, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality and limiting their potential to contribute to society in meaningful ways (Juma, 2021).

Cultural beliefs create tension between motherhood and ideal worker roles, which may play a part in reproducing the patterns of inequality (Correll et al., 2007). The assumption that women are primarily suited for nurturing roles can lead to them being passed over for leadership positions or high-stakes projects. Employers may consciously or unconsciously view women as less committed to their careers, especially if they are of childbearing age. The belief may often also be in women being funneled into "pink-collar" jobs that are seen as extensions of their presumed nurturing nature - such as teaching, nursing, or social work. While these are valuable professions, this segregation limits women's representation in other fields and typically results in lower pay.

In addition to gender discrimination, women may also face pregnancy discrimination in the workplace. Pregnancy discrimination is indeed a significant issue that compounds the challenges women face in the workplace. This form of discrimination occurs when an employer treats a woman unfavorably because of pregnancy, childbirth, or a medical condition related to pregnancy or childbirth. Working mothers are often discriminated against in the workplace, particularly at lower levels of jobs, due to the social theory that they are less efficient and more likely to leave their jobs to raise children (Verma & Negi, 2020). Pregnancy discrimination can manifest itself in various ways – being passed over for promotions, facing reduced work hours or responsibilities, being denied reasonable accommodations, being subjected to unfair treatment or harassment, being forced to take unpaid leave or resign due to pregnancy-related health issues, or even termination upon revealing a pregnancy.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has established standards on maternity protection to address two primary areas of discrimination women face in the workplace (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014). Firstly, "employment discrimination" encompasses the loss of a job by a female worker during pregnancy or maternity leave, including the period following her return to work. This includes the non-appointment of a woman employee to the same or equivalent position she held before her maternity period. Secondly, "*discrimination in treatment*" refers to a woman being treated less favorably in a work situation due to her reproductive function. This can include unfair treatment, harassment, or unequal opportunities, all of which can have significant negative impacts on a woman's career and overall well-being. (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014)

Women may face discrimination while pregnant, after delivery, and during motherhood. Because of the differing degrees and visibility, a line must be drawn between the two. Pregnancy discrimination is a dynamic stigma that varies in visibility and stability throughout time. It can be considered disruptive and unstable, depending on the woman's health. Motherhood discrimination is a permanent but potentially concealable stigma. It stays invisible because there is no physical manifestation. While the former type can improve the prominence of women's femininity, the latter is more stable and deserves special attention.

With the enactment of legislation that illegalises discrimination based on sex and parental status, there has been a gradual shift from overt discrimination to more covert forms (Cheung et al., 2022). The shift has led to the growth of a new sub-segment within subtle discrimination termed as normative discrimination, which is the result of societal expectations that mould gender responsibilities (Correll et al., 2007). Even though organisations and employers may view working mothers as competent, they continue to believe that the woman's place is at home with their children (Correll et al., 2007; Verma & Negi, 2020). The expectation that women should take care of their motherly responsibilities leads to biased attitudes in the workplace.

Motherhood discrimination is most often covert because attached to the differential treatment is the difficulty in proving discriminatory intent. Covert discrimination is a subtle form that is difficult to detect due to shifting social views and civil rights regulations. Often disguised as an accidental, this discrimination may occur more persistently (Cheung et al., 2022). It is a subtle, indirect, or hidden form of unfair treatment based on protected characteristics – in this case, gender and parental status. Unlike overt discrimination, which is blatant and easily recognisable, covert discrimination is often more difficult to identify and prove. Because of its ambiguous nature, it is difficult to identify but takes shape in the form of subtle biases, microaggressions, negative attitudes, exclusionary practices, euphemisms, selective enforcement of rules, and gaslighting.

The impact of covert discrimination has profound damaging effects on the personal and professional lives of working mothers. In isolation, individual instances may seem minor. However, the cumulative effect of persistent biases can create a hostile work environment that takes a significant toll on employees' well-being and performance. The constant exposure to microaggressions and exclusionary practices may lead to increased stress, anxiety, depression, or a sense of not belonging (Verma & Negi, 2020). Moreover, the insidious nature of covert discrimination can make it challenging for victims to articulate their experiences or seek recourse, often leaving them feeling isolated and powerless.

The discriminatory behavior is most evident in one of the six forms – recruitment and hiring, promotions, pay, deployment, training, and lay-offs (Kim et al., 2019). Cases of recruitment discrimination have been documented as early as 1982 (Firth, 1982), with findings showing a double disadvantage for mothers in the job market. Women were less likely to be called back for interviews than men, and mothers faced an even lower chance. Employers may avoid hiring pregnant women due to concerns about maternity leave, perceived reduced productivity, or anticipated accommodations. Some may ask inappropriate questions about family planning during interviews or subtly discourage pregnant applicants. During interviews, the interviewer may be influenced by social and cultural traditions, and gender

differences (Wu et al., 2020). Women candidates with children are more likely to receive negativity in call-back messages, facing more interpersonal hostility (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005). Findings from reports of different countries across the world, including Croatia, Greece, Italy and Portugal, that show that women are forced to sign “*dimissioni in bianco*”, upon hiring. These undated resignation letters are used by employers on a later date to dismiss them from the job if they become pregnant. Kenya has a similar practice, where women are forced to sign an agreement upon hiring that they will not become pregnant. (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2014) Recruitment discrimination not only violates equal opportunity principles but also perpetuates gender inequality in the workforce. It can force women to choose between either starting a family or advancing their careers, leading to financial insecurity and career setbacks. The fear of such discrimination may cause women to hide their pregnancies during job searches, potentially compromising their health.

Upon crossing the obstacle of recruitment discrimination, women are hired at positions lower than men. The difference in salaries, known as the gender wage gap, is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon fueled by occupational segregation, differences in educational attainment, and motherhood. Working mothers are also promoted less as compared to women without children or men. Employers may use pregnancy and motherhood as a justification to deny promotions and raises of women employees on the ground that women take time off to raise their children and look after their family. The consequence of denials in promotions is that women gather less experience at the workplace compared to men in the same age bracket or with similar educational qualifications.

The pervasive nature of motherhood discrimination at the workplace has far-reaching consequences that not only the professional lives, but also influence their reproductive choices and personal lives. Working women may find themselves in a difficult position, having to choose between advancing their career, or starting a family. Contrary to the dilemma faced uniformly by women across the globe, men do encounter this difficulty. The fear that the choice of motherhood may lead to a career setback can influence women to postpone or forego childbirth.

The apprehension stems from the well-founded concern that employers see pregnancy as a liability instead of a natural process fundamental to a woman's life cycle (Salihu et al., 2012; Uma & Kamath, 2020). Consequentially, women worry that their pregnancy may result in fewer opportunities for their professional growth, reduced chances of being hired for new positions, or diminished interest from employers in their professional development. The fear that many such working women face is not a hypothetical example; rather, it rests on research and studies (Cheung et al., 2022; Cotter, 2010; Kim et al., 2019; Son & Böger, 2021). When women return to work after their maternity leave, they may find themselves demoted to less challenging roles or passed over for special projects. The loss of bonuses and incentives tied to important opportunities may disproportionately affect women who take time off for childbirth and early childcare.

The ramifications of motherhood discrimination extend beyond personal and professional, impact the society as a whole. When educated and skilled women are compelled to delay motherhood or refuse childbearing, it may lead to demographic shifts and exacerbate existing social issues related to aging populations and declining birth rates. Moreover, the loss of

diverse perspectives and talents in leadership positions can hinder innovation and progress across various sectors.

Artificial Intelligence as a Tool for Mitigating Motherhood Discrimination

Artificial intelligence systems may be categorised as having three levels (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019) – cognitive intelligence skills, human skills, and emotional and social intelligence. The first level, or *analytical AI*, provides foresight about the future by using past data and experiences. Examples include fraud detection systems in financial services, image recognition, and self-driving cars. In the second level, known as *human-inspired AI*, AI understands people's emotions such as joy, anger, surprise, and disappointment and uses them in its decisions, and is gradually being developed by government agencies (Adikari & Alahakoon, 2021) and companies. The third humanoid level has yet not been reached (Uymaz, 2021).

Organisations have been using technology as a potential solution to address persistent biases in hiring. Integrating AI and hiring is not a recent development (Albaroudi et al., 2024). The earlier designed technologies enhanced efficiency by reducing the time and effort invested in such tasks. AI is integrated across various organisational processes, including HR functions like recruitment, talent management, and performance evaluation. It is optimum for saving cost and time, decreasing risks, and increasing efficiency by taking rational decisions. It also plays a key role in operational areas such as production planning, quality control, risk management, workplace safety, and customer relations. In some organisations, AI is both the owner and final decision-maker of the organizational process (Uymaz, 2021), as it provides objectivity and impartiality (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2020). The advanced use of AI-assisted technology and machine learning algorithms during recruitment offers promising opportunities.

Employee recruitment and selection consist of many phases to serve two key purposes: ensuring equal opportunities for all candidates and objectively evaluating their suitability for the available positions (Uymaz, 2021). By breaking down the hiring process into distinct phases, employers aim to provide a fair and transparent platform for candidates to showcase their skills and qualifications. Phased recruitment also enables employers to match candidates with the most appropriate roles, based on their unique strengths, experience, and fit with the job requirements.

An initial stage in hiring is the assessment of candidates' CVs and resumes by recruiters to identify the candidates meeting the required skills for the specific position (Fisher et al., 2022). This stage establishes whether the candidate will proceed to the next stage of assessments and interviews. However, HR professionals may receive a large bulk of applications on a regular basis. AI algorithms can analyse resumes for skills and qualifications without considering factors like gender or marital status. The tools can be designed to focus solely on job-relevant criteria, ignoring factors such as gender, age, race, or pregnancy status that might unconsciously influence employers. To evaluate resumes, two methods are employed by the system – first, identification of common features of successful profiles, and second, creation of evaluation norms itself by learning from the profiles in the pool (Uymaz, 2021). AI systems can rapidly analyse large volumes of resumes, identifying key qualifications, skills, and experience that align with the job requirements without being swayed by names, photos, parental status, family background, or other personal information

that might trigger unconscious biases. It optimizes time and resources, facilitating efficiency in hiring. A blind screening process can help ensure that candidates are judged on their potential and merits. AI's lack of emotions and objectivity allows for unbiased decision-making, a potential benefit in areas where human subjectivity can cloud judgment.

Technological support can assist in the creation and evaluation of standardised testing and assessment processes. By using consistent, pre-defined questions and evaluation criteria across all candidates, these systems can help ensure a more equitable comparison of applicants. This standardisation can be particularly beneficial in reducing the impact of subjective judgments that might be influenced by personal biases or preconceptions. Additionally, data analytic tools can be used to track “diversity metrics” through the hiring process, which may assist in identifying the stages where pregnant women or new mothers might be disproportionately rejected from advancing to the next stage. Such insight can help employers pinpoint areas for improvement in their recruitment processes, paving the way for more working mothers to get employment.

AI aims to mitigate biases and subjective mental models, promoting objectivity, consistency, and transparency throughout organizational processes. During job interviews, artificial intelligence systems evaluate candidates on three recognizable traits – speech, voice frequency, and facial expressions (Uymaz, 2021). By creating a multi-criteria time sequence, it “generates a report card” for each potential employee, without the attached prejudice associated with women returning from maternity leave.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

AI-driven resume screening has potential risks and biases, which may be classified as measurement bias, representation bias, and omitted variable bias (Albaroudi et al., 2024). If the training data used to develop these algorithms contains biases, the AI system may perpetuate discrimination by overlooking qualified candidates from underrepresented groups. Measurement bias occurs if an individual's particular feature or trait may be considered while building judgement because the trait has been historically over-measured (Varona & Suárez, 2022). If the training data identifies certain features previously used by organisations during hiring that do not accurately capture skills and traits relevant to the job, it may amount to measurement bias. One such example is if the organization has repeatedly given preference to men over women, or women without children instead of mothers, during the recruitment and promotion process (Cuddy et al., 2004). Under-representation or over-representation of a certain group may further result in representation bias (Shahbazi et al., 2023). One such example is Amazon's AI hiring system that favors male-centric-language patterns, thereby discriminating against female applicants (Dastin, 2018).

Another type of bias that may arise while using AI in hiring is the omitted variable bias, which overlooks certain skills that are critical in the appointment of an individual to an organization (Wilms et al., 2021). For example, technology may focus solely on technical skills mentioned in the resume, but it would not pay attention to critical components such as interpersonal and communication skills. Over-reliance on technicalities and AI's ignorance of candidates' behavior by AI could lead to the denial of opportunities for working mothers.

The lack of human oversight and accountability in AI-driven decisions can further strengthen the presence of motherhood myths in the workplace. Organisations that have previously

shown a reluctance to employ working mothers because they tend to see such candidates as less committed to their jobs (Verniers & Vala, 2018), may cause the AI system to develop an aggregation bias. Aggregation bias occurs when inferences made about individuals are based on the analysis of an entire population, leading to erroneous conclusions. This type of bias can arise when using machine learning algorithms fail to account for individual-level variations, and instead rely on broad generalisations derived from population-level data (Sun et al., 2020).

Another important consideration is transparency. Candidates should be informed when AI tools are used in the hiring process, and there should be clear explanations of how these tools work and their criteria. This transparency can help build trust and allow for process scrutiny to ensure fairness.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence offers powerful tools to combat hiring biases. Technological assistance should achieve a broader, holistic approach to promoting diversity and inclusion. This approach should include unconscious bias training for all employees involved in hiring decisions, diverse interview panels, structured interview processes, and clear, objective criteria for evaluating candidates.

While AI offers promising avenues for preventing pregnancy discrimination, it is not a panacea for motherhood discrimination in the workplace. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge and address the ethical concerns associated with using technology. AI is only as unbiased and transparent as the humans who train and develop the algorithms. Since AI picks up on practices previously used by the company, and identifies potential biases in the employers' behavior, it may amplify these biases, by presupposing that such differential treatment towards working mothers is in fact a necessity required by the organization.

To mitigate risks associated with using AI, employers must carefully and regularly audit their AI hiring tools, monitor for disparate impact, and ensure human oversight throughout the recruitment process. This may be achieved by the composition of an expert team of diverse individuals who are aware of potential ethical limitations associated with the use of AI. They should investigate the effectiveness of AI-based interventions in real-world workplace settings and develop methods for mitigating bias in AI training data sets. This would include designing user-friendly and transparent AI tools for HR professionals.

Responsible implementation of AI can streamline resume review, but employers remain accountable for fair and equitable hiring practices. Future research and development should focus on creating fair and transparent AI systems that promote workplace equality for all genders. As suggested above, artificial intelligence may prove to be a valuable ally in fighting against motherhood discrimination at the workplace. However, its implementation must be carefully managed to ensure that it finds solutions to the problem instead of perpetuating or masking existing biases. If used as a supplement to other inclusivity initiatives, AI has the potential to address and mitigate the discrimination that working mothers face. The use of AI should support human decision-making rather than replacing it entirely.

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