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Discrimination in the Workplace: Women of Color

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Inequality is happening in many forms	3
History	4
Disproportionate Rights & Employment Challenges	4
Suffering the Wage Gap	5-6
Missed Opportunities.....	6
Discrimination Affects Businesses and Individuals	7-9
Costly Price for Businesses	7
Large Companies are not exempt.....	8
Issues Women of Color Face.....	8-9
Gender does not mean “Sisterhood”	9
Companies Gain in Moving Towards Diversity	10
My Future Business Plan	10
Discussion	11
Conclusion	12-13
Resources	14-15
Appendix A - Interviews	16-19
Interview 1	16-17
Interview 2	17-19



Introduction

This paper will dive into the history of discrimination in the workplace for women of color, their fight for equality, how discrimination has affected individuals and businesses, and how companies and individuals can work towards diversity within the workplace. Two interviews with women of color are included to serve as primary research. Secondary research was performed in the form of scholarly journals, textbooks, video resources, and articles.

Inequality is happening in many forms

When attending an interview, questions about wages and benefits are the most frequently asked, but not usually the following, “Does this company promote social justice, diversity, and equality for all employees?” This is an important question to ask a potential employer, to be able to find out how multicultural they are. The reason being, is because discrimination is happening frequently, and the only thing that has changed is that employers are finding new ways of hiding their discretions. For women of color, there is the struggle of battling racial and gender discrimination. Social justice is not occurring in today’s workplace, women of color are being held back, stripped of opportunities, and experiencing workplace discrimination in multiple ways. The following list is just a few forms of discrimination women of color face:

- Wasted opportunities: overlooked for positions, promotions, and raises
- Wage discrimination: Unequal pay, bonuses, and perks
- Harassment: Sexual harassment, verbal abuse, bullying, assault, etc.

These problems are something that not only harm the victims, but they harm family, businesses, and the economy. Discrimination has been happening far too long and it is a problem that we can and should remedy.

History

Disproportionate Rights & Employment Challenges

In 1865 the 13th amendment was put into place, abolishing slavery; and in 1870 the 15th amendment was ratified, granting US citizens the right to vote and not be denied voting rights due to their race, color, or previous condition of servitude (meaning slaves) (NPS, 2020). But, even with the promise of equality to vote black women were not able to vote until the year 1919, when the house of representatives passed the 19th amendment (Wingfield, 2020). Around the year 1930 the great depression happened, this left unemployment rates rising, more so for



Walton, I. (2018, November 2). Gender equality non-existent in society even today. *Courtbouillon*. Retrieved from <http://www.ducourtbouillon.com/news/view.php/1035705/Gender-equality-non-existent-in-society->

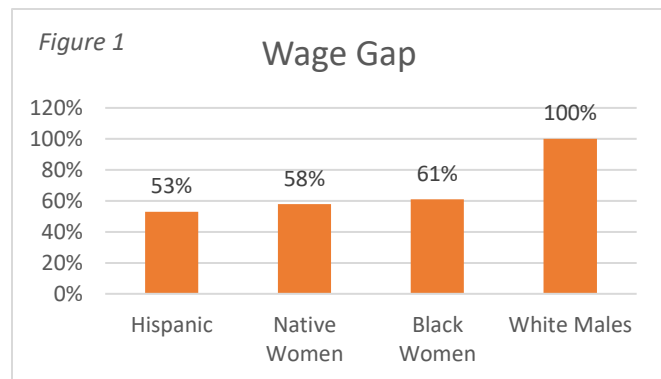
women of color (Gregory, 2015, p. 3). The article “*Women are advancing in the workplace, but women of color still lag behind,*” states that even with affirmative action policies during the civil rights movement, the policies have “disproportionately benefited white women” (Wingfield, 2020). Prior to 1940, around 50% of employers had a policy against hiring women of color, and before the 1960’s women of color found getting hired onto any clerical jobs almost impossible (Conrad, 2021, p.125). During the war, women were left without the financial support of their husbands, this required many women to enter the workforce to help support their families; but this was not the same for women of color. Instead, black women were urged to become domestic servants for the white women who worked (Conrad, 2021, p.125). Women of color were seeing employment challenges, even with equal or higher credentials they received domestic servant positions while white women received superior positions. Securing employment was not the only issue, but abuse in the workplace and a very large wage gap was and is also happening.

Suffering the Wage Gap

The wage gap measures are wage differences between genders, and ethnic groups relative to a white male. In the 1950 ethnic women earned 60 cents for every dollar a white woman made (Conrad, 2021, p.124). Even with more women than men entering higher education programs since the 1980's, there is still a significant wage gap for women of color (Salam, 2019).

According to a *New York Times* article by Maya Salam, “*Womansplaining the Pay Gap,*” in 2019 the general gender wage gap was at 87%, but for women of color the gap widens 79 cents

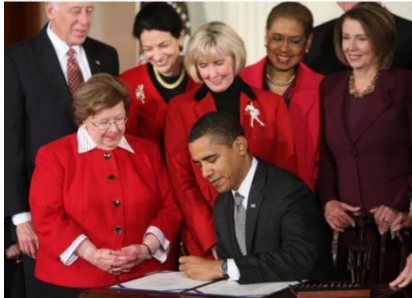
for every dollar that their white male counterparts make (*Figure 1* shows the breakdown of the wage gap women of color face in comparison to her white male counterparts). The salary difference is so



significant that when viewing them in real dollars we can see that Latinas are receive only \$36,110 annual salary, while their male colleagues are making \$65,208; this is a \$29,098 difference (NPWF, 2020). According to the “*National Partnership for Women and Families*” (NPWF) website this wage gap is enough to pay for “three additional years of tuition and fees for a four-year public University.” During the interviews with Interviewee 1, she mentioned that she had experienced a pay gap of \$30k less than her white male counterpart who had less credentials. Interviewee 2 said that she had experienced white female colleagues receiving more compensation, even when holding the same positions. Women of color who are suffering through these situations are experiencing missed opportunities that cause ripple effects throughout their lives.

Missed Opportunities and Glass Ceilings

Women of color are not being considered for higher management positions that pay well. In 2009 the “Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act,” was signed by President Obama. The act intended to implement new laws towards discrimination and pay gaps for women within the workplace. Even with the signing of this fair pay act and the long history of amendments that have changed laws restricting discriminatory behavior in the workplace, women are still faced with the



Surrounded by members of Congress President Barack Obama signs the Lilly Ledbetter Act with Lilly Ledbetter, at center behind Obama, Thursday, Jan. 29, 2009, in the East Room at the White House in Washington. (AP Photo/Ron Edmonds) Third-Party-Submitted

challenging issues of discrimination. According to the *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* website, “*Household data annual averages of employed persons,*” the number of white individuals employed in management occupations in 2019 was 83.6%, while Black individuals are at 7.8%, Asians at 6.1%,

Hispanics and Latinos are grouped together at 10.7%. A real example of the glass ceiling for women of color is when Interviewee 2 stated, “I have never been able to have a management position due to discrimination, and I have missed opportunities due to it” (Anonymous 2, 2021). I have personally encountered this situation when I was passed over for a promotion; my colleague who had no experience, received the position. The CEO pointed out that he did not want a woman of color to hold a management position because, “Women are an embarrassment, they make us look weak. They might get hurt or raped? Women are too emotional, and they always cry sexual harassment, that’s something we don’t need.” Discrimination like this can become very costly for individuals. For me, I was unable to afford my own home, while my colleague who received the promotion, purchased a new home. These glass ceilings can also make qualifying for management positions in the future even more difficult because women are lacking the experience on their resumes due to being held back by their employers.

Discrimination Affects Businesses & Individuals

Costly Price for Businesses

Discrimination cases can be grueling for the plaintiff and have a low success rate. For example, during the years 1979-2006, only 15% of discrimination cases litigated in Federal Courts were successful for plaintiff's (Gregory, 2015). Businesses apply funds towards lawyers to fight their legal battles; this makes their odds of winning high, and if they happen to lose their trial, there is a much higher success rate in appeals court (Gregory, 2015). You may ask what makes winning cases difficult for the plaintiffs? Some judges are prejudicial and skeptical about racial discrimination cases (Gregory, 2015). However, discrimination suits against companies do not always fail; companies are paying large settlements out of court to keep victims quiet. For example, during interview 1, the interviewee speaks about witnessing companies losing money over discrimination lawsuits. Interviewee 1 stated that she had experienced and witnessed women of color being mistreated, sexually harassed, and even assaulted by her employer; some of these companies paid for their actions through settlements. Interviewee 2 stated that she had worked for employers who eventually lost their businesses due to discrimination. This type of situation has an economic effect, which leads to higher unemployment rates. For example, during 1964, unemployment rose twice as much for nonwhite workers compared white workers. Also, in 1970, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission recorded 14 thousand racial discrimination complaints within the first six months of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act being passed (Gregory, 2015, p. 17). In addition, in 2019 the *U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* saw "72,675 charges of workplace discrimination;" 33% of the cases were based on racial discrimination, 4.7% color, 1.5% equal pay act, and 32.4% based on sexual discrimination in 2019 (USEEOC, 2019).

Large Companies are not exempt

Tyler Sonnemaker explains that “since 2000, 99% of Fortune 500 companies paid out settlements due to at least one discrimination lawsuit,” (2020). A variety of well-known companies like Uber, Coca-Cola, Target, UPS, Riot Games, Amazon, Fox News, Bloomberg, and Google have faced lawsuits where they have found themselves paying out multimillion-dollar settlements due to discrimination. A few of them have been sued multiple times per year, and some of those cases involved companies covering up rape, and health hazards. These are financial consequences that companies just cannot afford to have on their record or pocketbooks. When these discrimination cases go to court, there is an unnecessary strain on the economy, individuals, and their families.

Issues Women of Color Face

Discrimination in the workplace affects women of color and leads to issues like high stress, work overload, questioning decisions, and feeling like an outcast in the workplace. For instance, interviewee 1 mentioned that company time and money was being lost in decoding unclear tasks and being given the work of her male colleagues; this was costly, and mistakes were being made. Interviewee 1 also mentioned that her decision-making skills were questioned but not those of white male colleagues. When processing raises or promotions to ethnic employees, she was forced to dispense raises to white males. This situation is a clear example of a toxic environment that leads to increased stress. Colleagues and clients can be culprits of discrimination as well. For example, Adi Wingfield shares that one nurse reported a colleague commenting, “Oh, you can come to my house, but you’d have to be carrying a pail and wearing a rag on your head to come to my home,” (Wingfield, 2020). Wingfield also stated that within the medical field almost every black female doctor was not only subjected to sexism from

coworkers, but they experienced preemptive assumptions of being nurses due to gender. Also, doctors and nurses find that they are being racially discriminated against by their colleagues. Interviewee 1 stated that a former employer tried to forcibly have her exorcised by her colleagues, because of her ethnic background. Interviewee 2 stated that white clients and males would demand white female staff service them. My personal experience has been having my services declined by white female clientele because they said I had different skin than theirs.

Gender does not mean “Sisterhood”

We cannot assume that all women are treated alike due to their gender, because it is an unrealistic ideology, but all people should be treated equally regardless of their differences. The “*Intersectionality*” reading states that “by and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense of homogeneity of experience covered by the word “sisterhood” that does not, in fact, exist” (Dhillon, Lyon 2014). It has been my experience that white women within the workplace assume they are being treated the same as women of color. I have heard these women saying statements like, “we women should stick together”, but when discrimination occurs against a woman of color, the comments would be more like, “you’re reading into the situation wrong. When I was in this position, I was told multiple times that I was too sensitive, or that I needed thicker skin.” When circumstances like this occur, women of color find themselves lost and without aid, due to the lack of having a mentor; they are left feeling uncomfortable and excluded. Toxic companies that are riddled with discrimination often cause them to fail. Fortunately, there are many companies that are finding ways of creating a multicultural environment.

Companies Gain in Moving Towards Diversity

In efforts of evening the playing field for women of color, some well-known companies are working towards social equality. The company, “Cisco,” has insisted on having their recruiters be a mix of genders and ethnicities. Since Cisco has introduced this process, they have seen 70% more black perspectives and 50% more females and Latinos become recruited, and interviewed than they have before (Working Mother, 2016). Cisco, and CA Technology are on the right path to creating a more multicultural workplace in hopes that it catches on and becomes a trend with other companies; it may take a while, but it is possible. Companies like this who support women of color and diversity have become more successful, see less turnover and lawsuits, and receive less EEOC complaints (Packnet, 2018). These diverse companies will be able to cater to an equally diverse consumer who is more familiar to the community, the company will be more innovative and creative. They will seem more appealing to the public eye since the consumer can relate to the company more than nondiverse companies.

My Future Business Plan

I plan to have a business of my own in the future, and within that business it is my goal to foster diversity, innovation, and positivity; I will pride myself on a non-toxic environment, a place that is equal, and gives opportunities. I have complete faith that my business will promote social justice, because I am devoted to supporting and motivating my team to grow within the company and learn as much as they can along the way.

Discussion

When examining the reasoning behind discrimination I cannot help but wonder if the problem might be that the feeling of guilt, privilege, and freedom to gain what is not earned, comes with individuals who are excluding women of color. In my experience, I have found that males exclude women of color from promotions because it makes them seem weak, or that they are giving the wrong impression behind the promotion or raise. Men may feel emasculated or threatened by the fact that a woman of color receives a promotion over them, and that the tension is that white males feel a sort of entitlement. Therefore, some men “devalue women and enact other exclusionary processes to prevent women from taking over” (Bloch, Buck, Church, & Taylor, 2020). It is my belief, that if a company is discriminating against women of color, white males are reaping the benefits of the company’s discriminatory acts. There are times where it is difficult for individuals who are witnessing discrimination to speak up due to fear of being discriminated against themselves. I think that some oppressors have the idea that if they continue aiding in discrimination, the line of privilege amongst themselves, their family, and friends will allow them to be prioritized and have the advantage overall; this needs to change. Oppressors may feel threatened by hardworking women of color, in thoughts that this is their way of showing off or trying to steal work from them. But unfortunately, the hard truth is that women of color are taught to work hard from the day they start in the workforce, because they know they will have to work twice as hard as white male and females to be able to keep their jobs. Women of color cannot keep missing out on opportunities because of insecurities and fears of others. The government will need to create new laws and enforce the old ones they have created to protect individuals from discrimination. Businesses need to tackle discrimination from within the company and start creating a diverse environment that is inclusive.

Conclusion

Workplace discrimination continues to happen because the laws put in place to protect women of color are being treated as options instead of laws, and we see institutions supporting oppressors. It has been my experience that when there are complaints filed to the Labor and Industry department, the victims are told to “find another job,” and the discrimination continues. Within the workplace itself, the Human Resources departments, recruiters, and CEO’s, need to be accountable in creating a non-toxic environment for women of color. They are responsible for educating employees and senior management about social justice and discrimination policies. Also, coworkers and especially white male colleagues need to advocate for women of color; when you see something, say something, do not stay quiet when witnessing discrimination. Speak out and be a voice for the voiceless. Victims need to speak up, being silent is only aiding and signaling approval of the wrong behavior.

To be able to create a more welcoming environment without discrimination, companies will need to focus on what they can do for their diverse team members, and find ways to support women of color, focus on inclusion, and terminate the “only one” factors within their workplace; this means a woman of color should not be the only one of her race or gender at a workplace. Companies will need to hold women of color to an equal performance standard as men and offer women opportunities to advance within the workplace. Employers will need to make more significant investments into creating a more empathetic, and flexible environment for women of color; this will help companies retain women for the long-term future (Coury, Huang, Kumar, Prince, Krvkovich, & Yee, 2021).

Companies like Cisco, and CA Technology are a great example, they are on the right path to creating a more multicultural workplace. There may be challenges that some companies may face when recreating their methods, but it is vital. When initially building a socially just workplace I experienced accusations of favoritism, fraternizing, and called “racist.” This was resolved by properly educating and communicating to teammates. The outcome will be that individuals who feel slighted from equality, will become less frightened of what they are unfamiliar with, and no longer have a fear of losing. Women of color have worked very hard to get this far in hopes to see change. The education system is seeing more women enrolling in school programs to beat the odds. When interviewing, ask questions, speak up; this is your opportunity to find out how the company is, and what they will offer you, a diverse space or an “only me” space.



<https://united4equality.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/sisterhood-equalitys-call-to-action/>



Resources

2016 Best companies for multicultural women: this year's winners boast leading-edge programs to hire more women of color and make sure their careers progress as far as possible.

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Appendix C – Interview

The first interview was conducted in person, with a mid-level manager who has worked within the service and retail industries. The second interview was conducted via phone, with a seasoned employee within the beauty and service industry. The identity of the interviewees is kept private to protect them from any legal ramifications that may present itself, and so that they are comfortable to answer freely. The third interview to take place was later declined due to the interviewee refusing to identify with her ethnic background.

Interview 1: Anonymous 2, Beauty/Service Industry

Q: Have you witnessed a wage gap due to your nationality?

A: Yes, white women received more compensation than me, but I always thought it was due to their experience level. I noticed it was not experience level when my white co-workers said they did not have experience, or their experience was less than mine. Management looked at me like I could not do what white women could do, or I did not have as much experience as they did. I applied to a job where the salary was posted but I was offered less, or not interviewed. While in the interview It was almost like they were talking me out of my experience. If I'm competing for a position against a white male I am not recommended for the job. Opportunities have not been available for me in the fields where males work.

Q: Have you witnessed poor treatment towards women of color within your work history?

A: I have witnessed a woman of color competing for a managerial position and the position was given to a white male. In the salons that I have worked for, gay white males will receive more compensation than women of color. Also, customers coming into the salon's usually choose the white males to service them over women. I have usually seen customers sticking to their own races when choosing a hairdresser, but mostly white women and men choose white males over women of color to service them. When I worked in a spa, I noticed the opposite where male massage therapists are not in demand, and other men will not go to male massage therapist due to stereotypes. Any minority that would come into the building, management would send them to me, no matter the industry.

Q: What costs have you seen, because of discrimination against minorities, women, and women of color?

A: I have never been able to have a management position due to discrimination, and I have had missed opportunities due to it. Also, I was held back from continuing my education because of dual discrimination against my disability and race so I was not able to finish my degree plan,



causing me to go to another college and choose a different career path, and costing the school my graduation, which looks bad on the school's graduation percentage. I have had this happen during high school as well, where I was held back and needing to homeschool due to discrimination with teachers, and students. This effects the school's graduation rate for the high school. A salon I worked for was extremely discriminatory towards women of color, they ended up shutting down their salons and going out of business. I have had one position where I have been treated equal, the instructions were clear, and there was no work overload. I have had discriminatory jobs give me double work, overloading me, making me work long hours, and giving me the work from white individuals. I have acquired multiple medical costs due to the discrimination and treatment from employers, this raises medical care costs for the economy.

Q: As a woman of color, during your employment have you experienced discrimination? To what extent?

A: I had a white male manager yell in my face and get aggressive while I was a teenager. I was accused of theft due to my race, and bullied, they looked through my purse, and threatened to arrest me for crimes I did not commit and threatened me if I called a lawyer or anyone for their abuse. Two white men locked me in a room, harassing me as if they had power. After this harassment I was bullied by my co-workers and ignored.

Interview 2: Anonymous, Mid-level Management, Service/Retail Industry

Q: Have you witnessed a wage gap due to your nationality?

A: Yes, I have witnessed a wage gap that at times to some employers I've worked for wasn't something they cared to hide, it was almost like it was the norm and they had a right to discriminate. The last position I worked in there was an annual \$20k wage gap from the previous ethnic male working the same position with less credentials, meaning less education, experience, and field experience. I was told that he was a "man," so he deserved more money. I argued my raise and was given a 7k annual raise but not prior to cursing me out, sexually harassing me, and being told I would have to "earn my raise." The wage gap between the white male with yet again less credentials was about a \$30-\$40k wage gap for the same position, along with additional bonus plan and better benefits with about a quarter of my job description. I have applied for jobs in the past where their posting online says \$90-140k but then when offered the position I was offered \$55k, that is \$35k less than the minimum starting wage for the job.

Q: Have you witnessed poor treatment towards women of color within your work history?

A: Oh yes. I have not only witnessed poor treatment of women in general but there is a interjectionally where women of color not only have to have more credentials, but also work harder and expect to work even harder when given the positions over white males. I have seen that most women of color do not make it through the initial job application, and even rarer through the interview process. They have been portrayed as emotional, fertile, sexual, unprofessional, lazy, criminal, and "a lawsuit waiting to happen." These are all things I have heard women of color being labelled as.

Q: What costs have you seen, because of discrimination against minorities, women, and women of color?



A: I want to say that the biggest costs I have seen towards minorities and women of color are lawsuits. I have seen a few companies get sued in my time, but the ironic thing is that the company who gets sued usually never learns their lesson, they usually learn to hide their discrimination more effectively like instead of sending texts or saying things in front of others, they will make phone calls or closed office rooms. But I don't feel that these things end up staying secret for long, they usually end up getting sued again. Another way is that businesses lose the imagination of the person they are discriminating against, by not hiring or terminating the individual. If the business weren't discriminating against them, the individual may have some really good ideas to help grow their business, and businesses are losing out on these things. The other way I feel that discrimination costs businesses is that repeating emails delegating tasks, and burning out employees happens because at times when a company chooses to discriminate, they will send tasks that are not clear to the employee, or when the individual is delegating employees, they may be questioned or not listened too; this can cause issues with clientele and prioritizing tasks. Companies can lose money from this. I remember when I was given wicked tasks by my discriminating boss, I would end up wasting precious hours and some times days on duplicating tasks that would have been done correctly with several emails and phone calls saved the first time around if given proper instruction.

Q: As a woman of color, during your employment have you experienced discrimination? To what extent?

A: Oh, yes. When I first entered the workforce, I had an amazing manager and the company I worked for was extremely interested in my wellbeing as well as my succession within the company. They had always trained me so that I could increase my job skills, I was only 15 so it seemed like this was normal, I did not know it would be the only place that I would be treated equal. The next place of work was nothing but minorities, mostly male minorities. I was sexually harassed, paid less than everyone, and at times I would not get paid. I was young and did not understand the concept of discrimination and sexual harassment. I refused to wear a short skirt and heels as a busser, so I was terminated. I did not acknowledge that I was being discriminated against until I was in my early 20's when I was passed over for promotions to several uneducated unexperienced white women and men. The rest of my employment would be experiencing racism, sexual harassment, discrimination based on my sex, and assault. Most of the places I have been employed with I have either been the only minority or I have been in the group of very few minorities. I am usually hired on because the employer cannot resist getting a candidate who has extremely good credentials for less pay than white women and men. I have been told to terminate employees due to their sex, sexual orientation, weight, religion, race, and because they are too attractive or not attractive enough, in all cases I refused. My employer would scream in my face, attempt to assault me, sexual harass me and call me names but would not do these same actions to the males in the company. I was told that I was aggressive but the white woman who was calling me name and threatening to cause me harm was being just. Ethnic men were sexual beings that women could sexually harass and get away with. I was harassed at a church I worked for, I was told I was a sinner and evil due to race, and religion. The church attempted forcibly exorcise me because they said my ethnic background was evil. The church consisted of all white employees with one black male who they asked to lock me in a room and forcibly exorcise me. The only females that worked for this company were all admin, because they said males should be supporting their families and females need to find men to support them. When I reported this to the state, I was told to find another job if I did not like it and that the church could do whatever they wanted since they were nonprofit. I was told that I was evil and that my ancestors raped and murdered. I was physically threatened by the pastor.

Q: Have you noticed a difference in treatment and wages between men of color and women of color?

A: This is something that I have noticed a lot. With one of my previous employers, I would notice anything to \$5 more to \$.25 more. It was never based on their credentials, it was always based on looks, color, and gender. When I say color, I mean if I was given a Latina's hiring packet, I would see that there was an extra \$.25 to \$1.00 more in wages due to how light her skin tone was, and that the dark-skinned Latinas would have to take drug tests and are given the minimum wage. All East Indian men were given very low pay at minimum without increases due to being labeled as expendable workhorses while East Indian women were considered more attractive and given more wages because they can "charm" clients with their looks. Black women, if they were not filtered out by their names during the applications, they were denied hire upon arrival with the famous quote "The position has been filled." White women were automatically given at least \$1.00 more than the rest and white men depending on the weight and age were given more than the white women. When I was giving promotions or raises, I was always questioned my intentions when promoting or giving raises to diverse groups. I was even accused of being involved in sexual relationships, being partial to those of my own nationality, and women due to the promotions and raises I would give. The way it worked was if I gave an ethnic individual a raise or promotion, I was required to give a white male a promotion and raise for absolutely no reason. The same went for the age gap, favoring the older white men over all races and sexes.

Q: What are do you suggest would help eliminate the inequality of women of color in the workplace?

A: I really think that people who say nothing and do nothing when they see someone being discriminated against are aiding and feeding into the discrimination. The privileged need to have a voice for the less privileged because they can. A black woman may tell her employer that she does not appreciate the comments about her colleagues' race, but it may not go so far as the white male that is in the room and doesn't appreciate the comments. I also feel that when someone is discriminated against, it needs to be recorded and action needs to be taken. Suing a company for 10 thousand dollars may not seem like justice but it is telling the company that this behavior is not allowed and is illegal and needs to stop. Speak up and speak up for others. If we do nothing, it will not be done. Record when you see injustice happening, help others to seek justice, support others in their fight for justice.

