Hiring same-gender applicants for jobs in gender-segregated occupations: experimental evidence from the Netherlands

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The literature on occupational segregation and gender discrimination in hiring has focused on three main mechanisms that can contribute to gendered employment patterns. First, men and women tend to have access to qualitatively different social networks which, in turn, channel them to gender-segregated occupations (Hanson and Pratt 1991; Reskin and Padavic 1994; Mc-Pherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Second, men and women have different occupational aspirations and tend to choose fields of study that bring them to gender-typical occupations, reinforcing occupational segregation (Polacheck 1981; Levine and Zimmerman 1995; Correll 2001). Third, even when the previous two mechanisms are not at play, and men and women apply for similar jobs, employers have gendered preferences during the hiring process that contribute to maintaining occupational segregation (Reskin and Roos 1990; Graves 1999).

In this study, we rule out, by design, the first two mechanisms of pre-hire gender sorting. We rely on a factorial experiment, in which participants are asked to play the part of recruiters and personnel managers and to rate profiles of hypothetical applicants in view of a hypothetical job opening in their organization (participants are third-year students of HR management from a large Dutch university of applied science, enrolled in a program that prepares them for a career as recruiters or personnel officers; we will refer to them as ‘employers’). These profiles vary systematically on a number of characteristics, including gender. Each employer is asked to evaluate all possible combinations of these characteristics to enable an estimation of the relative importance of these characteristics for the overall ratings. An important advantage of this design is that we have control on the entire applicant pool that is rated by each employer. By fixing the composition of applicant pools, we exclude the possibility that gender differences in the pre-application phase play a role in determining occupational segregation as an organizational outcome.
We replicate the same experiment twice with different participants (between-subjects design) and distinguish between two types of jobs: jobs in a male-dominated occupation (computer programming) and jobs in a female-dominated occupation (nursing). Importantly, we instruct participants that the educational background of all applicants is in a field that matches the job that has to be filled (e.g. informatics for male-dominated occupations and health for female-dominated occupations). This is important considering that the study is carried out in the Netherlands, a country with a very stratified education system, in which educational credentials are tightly linked to specific occupations in the labor market. In this context, fields of study are a crucial screening filter for employers. Thus, it is interesting to observe whether gender still plays a role in hiring decisions even when women and men have chosen for fields of study that are in line with the occupational domain of the jobs they apply for.

We also vary the way in which employers received the application, to explore the importance of social networks more into detail. Applicants were either recruited from the external labor market (they replied to a job ad), or they were recruited through a referral. If the latter, we specified whether the referral came from a male colleague or a female colleague. This way, we test whether recruiters react differently to referrals from same-sex and opposite-sex colleagues. Besides referral source and gender, in the experimental design we also specified whether or not a performance review was available to the employer during the screening (performance review available and positive; performance review not available but can be shown upon request). This allows us to test whether applicants from dominant and non-dominant genders are held to different standards: we test whether non-dominant genders have to ‘prove themselves’ by showing past evidence of good performance, and whether gender homophily or social ties can correct for the lack of precise signals.

By combining insights from different strands of literature (research on hiring discrimination, on occupational segregation, on evaluation bias, and on informal recruitment and the role of referrals in the hiring process), we aim to further our understanding of gendered employment patterns. First, by focusing on applicant pools, we can capture the pre-hire, demand-side mechanisms that lead to gendered employment outcomes (Fernandez and Sosa 2005). Second, our study is methodologically innovative as it rules out two alternative supply-side mechanisms that can potentially explain gendered occupational patterns, namely differences in the pre-application education choices of male and female applicants (as we fixed their field of study choice) and differences in the pre-application gendered composition of applicants’ networks (as we vary it in the experimental design and can control for it). This allows us to isolate the role of screeners’ choices during the hiring process. Finally, we study whether the same or different mechanisms are at play in male-dominated and female-dominated occupations, whereas much of the existing literature does not discuss into detail the factors that may contribute to gendered employment patterns in the two types of occupations.