

Gender Equity in U.S. Public Sector Workplaces: A Descriptive Analysis Across Historical Eras

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In a Nutshell

- A historical examination of U.S. public sector workplaces reveals patterns, shifts, and recurring themes that guided the trajectory of gender equity in these settings.
- Gender equity progress has fluctuated over the decades but the overall trend is positive.
- Significant logistical and normative challenges occur during periods of policy change.
- Findings underscore two key needs within public agencies:
 - Organizations are in need of structural changes to achieve gender inclusivity and positive gender equity outcomes.
 - Individual employees must be resilient actors to realize equitable outcomes.

The Problem

Gender equity in public sector workplaces remains elusive. Despite decades of significant progress, there has been growing support for the rollback of gender equity protections for public workers in recent months and years. The eradication of protections presents new challenges for public leadership and reinforces historical and systemic inequities. Understanding historic barriers and successes provides insight for leaders to further gender equity in public sector workplaces.

New Insights for Addressing the Problem

This research examines gender equity in public sector workplaces through a historic lens to better equip leaders and lawmakers to understand the patterns and recurring themes that emerged as gender equity efforts evolved in response to shifts in social and cultural norms. Progress towards greater SOGIE representation and protections in the workplace has ebbed and flowed throughout the country's history, and there remains a lack of permanence and consistency in established rights. This is due, in part, to a lack of formal workplace policies aimed at dismantling pervasive gender inequities.

Why Are These Insights Important?

While the overall trend towards greater gender equity is positive, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, it is important to remember progress is not always linear for public sector employees who do not conform to heteronormative standards. Historic and contemporary rollbacks of gender equity protections suggest that employee resiliency is as essential as inclusive workplace policies to preserving and advancing gender equity in the workplace during periods of policy regression.

What Should Decision Makers Do?

Public sector workplace leaders should

- Adopt agency-specific SOGIE policy to provide employees with a formal structure and assistance in navigating gender issues in the workplace.
- Address policy gaps in salient gender equity issues such as childcare, sex-specific dress codes, transitioning in the workplace, and facility usage.
- Design gender policy to address stereotypes and social norms - leaders must understand and account for impermanence in guiding legislation and craft policies that will promote gender equity through periods of regression *and* progression.

Public sector employees should

- Continue to be resilient actors by adapting, advocating, and upholding inclusive workplace practices to preserve and advance gender equity in the workforce.

What Do We Still Need to Know?

The establishment of enduring structural change across some public agencies relative to others is still not well understood. Identifying and examining examples of agencies that have advanced gender equity through structural change, at either the organizational or individual employee level, will help understand why these changes can be so challenging. An examination of factors that promote employee resilience may further inform leadership decisions when considering agency gender policies. Finally, an examination of distinct focusing events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and setbacks in federal SOGIE and DEI policies, can offer additional insights.

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