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THE SOURCE OF WORKPLACE BIAS: EVIDENCE FROM THE WORLD VALUES SURVEY

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Abstract

Workplace bias presents significant challenges to equity and inclusion within professional environments. While the detrimental effects of discrimination are extensively documented, the origins of workplace bias remain less understood. This study investigates predictors of workplace bias using data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–2022), encompassing approximately 56,000 employed respondents worldwide. The analysis targets four specific areas: exclusionary social attitudes, media exposure, professional memberships, and social affiliations. Results from correlation and regression analyses reveal that exclusionary social attitudes are the most robust predictor of workplace bias, indicating a strong correlation between intolerance towards marginalised groups and biased beliefs.

Additionally, media exposure demonstrates a small negative correlation with workplace bias, suggesting that access to diverse information may contribute to reduced prejudice. Conversely, professional memberships exhibit a slight mitigating effect on bias, whereas social affiliations are associated with an increase in bias. These findings emphasise that the primary roots of workplace bias lie in exclusionary beliefs, with media exposure and social affiliations playing secondary roles. To cultivate equitable workplace cultures, it is crucial to address these underlying causes by promoting inclusive norms, enhancing media literacy, and implementing targeted social interventions.

Keywords

Workplace Bias, Exclusionary Attitudes, Media Exposure and Organisational Membership

Introduction

Workplace bias continues to pose a substantial obstacle to equity and inclusivity, as both acts of discrimination and perceptions thereof undermine individual well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014) and performance (Mukhtar & Ibrahim, 2024). While there has been global progress in diversity initiatives, both subtle and explicit forms of bias, such as exclusionary attitudes towards gender, immigrants, and sexual orientation, are still deeply rooted in organisational cultures and influence decision-making (Leslie, 2019; Triana et al., 2015). The consequences of these biases extend beyond individual well-being, undermining trust, cooperation, and productivity at the institutional level (Mukhtar & Ibrahim, 2024; Schmitt et al., 2014). This underlines the importance of understanding the underlying sources of bias.

Research shows that workplace bias does not originate from a single source; it arises from the intersection of social stereotypes, cultural norms, and political values (Cortina et al., 2013). Research indicates that negative attitudes toward immigrants, female leaders, or LGBTQ+ individuals are often associated with discriminatory judgments in organisational contexts (Dhanani et al., 2018; Gündemir et al., 2017). However, most investigations into discrimination or employee bias focus primarily on its outcomes, such as employee turnover and disengagement, rather than on its causes. This knowledge gap is particularly concerning, as without identifying the drivers of bias, any proposed interventions may be superficial or misdirected (Agina et al., 2023; Greenwald et al., 2022).

The World Values Survey (WVS) offers a unique opportunity to address this gap by linking individual attitudes toward diversity with broader social and political orientations. In its seventh wave (2017–2022), the WVS includes several items that can be used to construct indices measuring attitudes and behaviours that serve as

precursors to discriminatory tendencies, as well as items suitable for creating indices of discriminatory attitudes themselves. These indices enable the systematic exploration of how bias is formed as an antecedent among employed populations worldwide (Haerpfer & Kizilova, 2016; Haerpfer et al., 2022). Building on this, the present study examines the sources of workplace bias, focusing on the relationship between hypothesised antecedents and bias, and assessing the relative strength of these factors across contexts. These insights provide a framework for developing evidence-based interventions to reduce bias in organisations.

The remainder of this manuscript is as follows: firstly, the study will review the relevant literature on workplace bias and its antecedents amongst traditional empirical studies. Secondly, the study will outline the methodology and analytical strategy using WVS data, and thirdly, we will present empirical findings; and finally, we will discuss the implications thereof.

Literature review

The following sections briefly review the literature and theoretical frameworks guiding the present study and conclude with the research aims.

Workplace bias refers to systematic disadvantages individuals face based on gender, race, sexual orientation, nationality, or other social characteristics, rather than on merit or performance (Nelson et al., 2019; Rafferty, 2020). Existing evidence indicates that workplace bias remains a significant global challenge (Metinyurt et al., 2021). In addition, meta-analyses and field experiments confirm that racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring continues across Western countries (Quillian & Lee, 2023). This challenge is intensified by intersecting disadvantages related to disability, age, and appearance (Lippens et al., 2023).

Gender bias continues to shape evaluations of leadership potential, with women rated less favourably for executive roles despite having comparable qualifications (Fisk & Overton, 2019; Heilman et al., 2024). LGBTQ+ applicants also encounter substantial barriers in recruitment and career advancement, particularly transgender candidates (Granberg et al., 2020). Beyond overt acts of discrimination, microaggressions, subtle and often unintentional slights, have received growing attention as a pervasive form of bias (Sue et al., 2007). A recent systematic review underscores both their widespread prevalence and their adverse effects on employee well-being and productivity (Salari et al., 2024).

Research into the psychological foundations of bias has often concentrated on implicit attitudes. While implicit bias measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), have been widely utilised, recent meta-analyses reveal that their predictive power for discriminatory behaviour is limited, and the effects of interventions are frequently small and short-lived (Forscher et al., 2019; Paluck et al., 2021). These findings emphasise the need to explore broader factors that extend beyond the individual, encompassing contextual, organisational, and societal influences.

The role of media in shaping perceptions of social groups has become increasingly significant in contemporary research. The Digital News Report 2025 indicates that social media and online influencers have surpassed television and print as the dominant sources of news in many societies, with global news avoidance reaching record levels (Newman, 2025). Selective exposure, echo chambers, and polarised content reinforce stereotypes and heighten intergroup divisions (Bail et al., 2018). In contrast, diverse internet use can expose individuals to counter-stereotypical information and reduce prejudice (Ramasubramanian, 2015). Traditional media theories help explain these dynamics: agenda-setting (Mccombs & Shaw, 1972) and framing (Entman, 1993) highlight how news emphasis and presentation shape public perceptions; Cultivation Theory (CT) suggests that heavy television exposure fosters stereotypical worldviews (Nacos, 2000); and more recent perspectives emphasize selective exposure and echo chambers, where individuals choose outlets that align with their beliefs, thereby reinforcing existing biases (Stroud, 2011). The Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) further demonstrates that media effects depend on personal characteristics and usage patterns, suggesting that outcomes vary by both content and medium (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). Despite these insights, systematic cross-national evidence on how specific media consumption influences workplace-related bias remains absent.

Workplace cultures and affiliations significantly influence employee norms and attitudes toward diversity (Genkova & Schreiber, 2022). Research in this area consistently reveals that short-term, one-off diversity training sessions tend to yield limited, and sometimes inconsistent, effects on behaviour. These findings raise important questions about the effectiveness of such training as standalone interventions for creating meaningful change (Chang et al., 2019; Dobbin & Kalev, 2019). In contrast, organisations that cultivate inclusive climates and proactively promote diversity experience notable benefits. These inclusive environments are closely linked to higher levels of employee engagement, greater collaboration among team members, and increased capacity for innovation (Gupta & Sharma, 2016; Randel, 2025). Such climates empower individuals to feel valued and secure in expressing diverse perspectives, which ultimately enhances overall organisational performance (Li & Tang, 2022).

Membership in organisations plays a crucial role in shaping norms, networks, and the flow of information. Social Capital Theory (SCT) suggests that associations transmit norms and foster generalised trust (Morrow &

Scorgie-Porter, 2017), while civic voluntarism highlights how resource and recruitment pathways vary across organisational types (Eliasoph et al., 1996). In professional contexts, associations frequently establish codes of conduct, embrace egalitarian policies, and promote diversity standards, thereby facilitating cross-group interactions and mitigating workplace bias (Hardy, 2016). By contrast, participation in some social and religious organisations, depending on doctrines and local cultures, may reinforce traditional or exclusionary norms, shaping less inclusive attitudes toward marginalised groups (Hatch et al., 2022; Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021). This distinction underscores the need to differentiate between professional associations, which generally support equity and intergroup contact, and broader social affiliations, which can perpetuate exclusionary attitudes (Schneider et al., 2022).

Theoretical framework

Several theories could be used as a structure or lens for this study. According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), people build their self-esteem through group membership, leading them to favour their own group and look down on others (Tajfel & Turner, 2019). Additionally, Integrated Threat Theory (ITT) explains that when people see groups like immigrants or minorities as threats, they tend to develop exclusionary attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). System Justification Theory (SJT) adds that people often support beliefs that maintain current social hierarchies, which can result in support for unequal job opportunities, favouring men or locals over others (Jost & Banaji, 1994). SIT can be readily linked to the excluding aspects of group belonging, as can ITT, which also emphasises the role of non-group membership. Both theories help explain the development of bias: individuals internalise group-based distinctions (SIT) and shape negative attitudes toward others (ITT). Media plays a central role in this process by communicating perceptions of group membership, either broadening or narrowing divisions.

Research objectives

The objective of this study was to identify predictors of workplace bias (given exclusionary social attitudes, media exposure, and organisational membership, as measured in the World Values Survey Wave 7).

In order to achieve this aim, the following objectives were set: (1) to identify variables in the WVS related to workplace bias and its possible predictors; (2) to develop indices capturing aspects that may predict workplace bias, as well as an index of workplace bias itself; (3) to evaluate the predictive power of these indices; and (4) to report on the antecedents of workplace bias according to their relative importance.

Method

Design

A cross-sectional survey design was used, drawing on items from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017–2022), a cross-national dataset capturing values, beliefs, and social attitudes across diverse cultural contexts (World Values Survey Association, 2022).

Sampling

The analysis focused exclusively on employed respondents, as the study concerns workplace bias. This focus is also important because individuals working in organisations are distinct: the contact hypothesis and supporting meta-analyses show that cooperative intergroup contact reduces prejudice (O'Connor, 2017; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Methodologically, excluding unemployed individuals avoids the introduction of non-workplace experiences that could confound the results. Restricting the sample, therefore, ensures that the study captures workplace-specific dynamics and the role of antecedents in shaping bias.

Research instrument

Because this study focused on workplace-related attitudes, analyses were restricted to respondents who were currently employed. Employment status was measured by Q279 (Current employment status), which differentiates between full-time, part-time, self-employed, retired, student, unemployed, housewife, and other categories. Only individuals coded as employed full-time, employed part-time, or self-employed were retained for analysis. All other categories were excluded.

To operationalise our constructs, we selected items with direct theoretical and empirical relevance to bias, diversity, and workplace information exposure. All items were recoded where necessary to ensure that higher scores consistently represented higher levels of the construct under study. Five composite variables were created as follows:

- Workplace bias: Workplace-related discriminatory attitudes were measured using five items: Men make better political leaders than women do (Q29), A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl (Q30), Men make better business executives than women do (Q31), When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women (Q33), and When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to people of this country over immigrants (Q34). Responses originally ranged from strongly agree to disagree

- strongly; items were reverse-coded so that higher values indicate greater workplace bias. An index was computed as the mean of the five items. A bias in favour of women thus dominated workplace bias.
- Exclusionary Attitudes Toward Diversity: To capture exclusionary orientations toward social outgroups, we used five "neighbour exclusion" items: People of a different race (Q19), Immigrants/foreign workers (Q21), Homosexuals (Q22), People of a different religion (Q23), and People who speak a different language (Q26). Response categories (1 = mentioned, 2 = not mentioned) were reverse-coded such that higher values represent more exclusionary attitudes. The mean across these five items formed the index.
- Professional Membership Index: Engagement in professional and institutional organisations was measured by four items: Labour union (Q97), Political party (Q98), Professional association (Q100), and Women's group (Q104). Response options (0 = not a member, 1 = inactive member, 2 = active member) were retained, with higher values reflecting stronger involvement. The index was calculated as the average across the four items.
- Social Membership Index: Broader social and civic engagement was assessed through seven items: Church or religious organization (Q94), Sports/recreational organization (Q95), Art, music, educational organization (Q96), Environmental organization (Q99), Charitable/humanitarian organization (Q101), Consumer organization (Q102), and Self-help/mutual aid group (Q103). As above, responses were coded 0-2, and the index was computed as the mean across all seven items, with higher values indicating stronger social membership involvement.
- Media Source Index: Information access and exposure were operationalized through eight items asking respondents how frequently they used different sources: Daily newspaper (Q201), TV news (Q202), Radio news (Q203), Mobile phone (Q204), Email (Q205), Internet (Q206), Social media (Q207), and Friends or colleagues (Q208). Original coding ranged from 1 (daily) to 5 (never). Items were reverse-coded so that higher values represent more frequent use, and the mean was taken to form the index.

All indices were constructed using the mean of available items to minimise case-wise deletion due to missing data. Higher values on each scale consistently represent greater bias, exclusion, membership, or media exposure.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 (Corp, 2022) and R version 4.4.0 (Team, 2025). The initial data preparation, index computation, and descriptive statistics were performed in SPSS. Advanced analyses, including relative importance (dominance) analysis, were carried out in R using the *relaimpo* package (Grömping, 2006).

Descriptive statistics for the sample were first reported. As most of the data were categorical, they are primarily presented as percentages to provide insights into the demographics of the working population. The results are presented in Table 1.

For the correlation analysis, bivariate associations among the primary study variables—Workplace Bias Index, Media Source Index, Diversity Exclusion Index, Professional Membership Index, and Social Membership Index were examined. Pearson's product–moment correlations (two-tailed) were calculated in R using the psych package (Revelle, 2017). Established thresholds for statistical inference were applied. All tests were two-tailed, with $p = .01$ used as the criterion for statistical significance. Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines: correlations of approximately .10 were considered small, .30 medium, and .50 large.

To assess the unique contributions of predictors, a multiple regression analysis was conducted in SPSS, with the Workplace Bias Index as the dependent variable. Predictor variables included the Media Source Index, Diversity Exclusion Index, Professional Membership Index, and Social Membership Index. Both unstandardized coefficients (B) and standardised coefficients (β) were reported to aid interpretation, along with model-level statistics (R, R^2, adjusted R^2, and F-test values). Confidence intervals for regression coefficients were generated to evaluate parameter precision. For regression analyses, significant standardised beta coefficients (β) were interpreted as practically significant (Toothaker et al., 1994).

Predictor relative importance was further estimated using dominance analysis to rank contributions in predicting workplace bias. Variance partitions (R^2) were evaluated across all possible subset models (Budescu, 1993; Grömping, 2006). This analysis was conducted in R with the relaimpo package, applying the LMG metric of general dominance weights. Results were expressed as both raw R^2 contributions and percentages of total variance explained. Two separate dominance analyses were performed: (a) media sources predicting workplace bias and (b) exclusionary attitudes toward diversity predicting workplace bias.

Ethical considerations

The WVS dataset is publicly accessible to all researchers, provided that appropriate citation practices are followed (see Haerpfer et al., 2022). No primary data were collected for this study. The use of secondary data was reviewed and approved by the local ethics committee under the code 2022_SBL_AC_001_SD.

Results

Demographical results

Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of key demographic variables from the World Values Survey relevant to the present study (N ≈ 56,000). The subsample includes only respondents who reported being employed.

Table 1: Demographical characteristics from WVS data used in the present study

Variable	Category (WVS codes)	Frequency	Percentage
Town size	-5 = Missing/Not asked	707	1.24
	1 = Capital, >500,000 inhabitants	11 059	19.41
	2 = 100,000–500,000	8 563	15.03
	3 = 20,000–100,000	11 739	20.60
	4 = 5,000–20,000	10 120	17.76
	5 = <5,000	14 799	25.97
Settlement type	-5/-2 = Missing	44	0.08
	1 = Capital city	12 071	21.18
	2 = Large city	11 052	19.39
	3 = Small city	9 917	17.40
	4 = Town	8 933	15.68
	5 = Village	14 970	26.27
Urban/rural	-5 = Missing	15	0.03
	1 = Urban	38 933	68.32
	2 = Rural	18 039	31.65
Gender (Q260)	-5/-2 = Missing	35	0.06
	1 = Male	31 744	55.70
	2 = Female	25 208	44.23
Age (Q263)	-5/-2/-1 = Missing	119	0.21
	1 = 18–29 years	53 423	93.75
	2 = 30+ years	3 445	6.05
Marital status (Q273)	-5/-2/-1 = Missing	229	0.40
	1 = Married	33 366	58.55
	2 = Living together	5 081	8.92
	3 = Divorced	2 656	4.66
	4 = Separated	1 290	2.26
	5 = Widowed	1 517	2.66
	6 = Single	12 848	22.55
Education (Q275)	-5/-2/-1 = Missing	382	0.68
	0 = No formal education	2 167	3.80
	1 = Incomplete primary	5 612	9.85
	2 = Completed primary	7 496	13.15
	3 = Incomplete secondary	13 845	24.30
	4 = Completed secondary	5 294	9.29
	5 = Some tertiary	4 961	8.71
	6 = Completed tertiary	11 755	20.63
	7 = Postgraduate	4 650	8.16
	8 = Other	825	1.45
Employment status (Q279)	1 = Full-time employed	34 969	61.36
	2 = Part-time employed	8 266	14.51
	3 = Self-employed	13 752	24.13

Respondents represented a range of settlement types and population sizes, with the largest share residing in villages (26.27%) or towns with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (25.97%), and smaller proportions in capitals or large cities. Consistent with national population distributions, most respondents were situated in urban areas (68.32%), while nearly one-third were from rural areas (31.65%).

The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with 55.70% identifying as male and 44.23% as female.

The age distribution was somewhat skewed toward younger adults, with 93.75% coded in the 18–29 group. In terms of marital status, most respondents were married (58.55%), followed by single (22.55%), cohabiting (8.92%), divorced (4.66%), widowed (2.66%), or separated (2.26%).

Educational attainment was widely distributed. The largest groups reported incomplete secondary education (24.30%) or completed tertiary qualifications (20.63%), with meaningful representation across primary, secondary, and postgraduate categories.

Employment status was concentrated in full-time employment (61.36%), with smaller but noteworthy proportions in self-employment (24.13%) and part-time employment (14.51%).

Although race and ethnicity are highly relevant to the study of diversity and bias, these variables were excluded from the analysis. In the World Values Survey (WVS), ethnicity is coded at the country level using nationally specific categories, which undermines comparability across contexts and risks misinterpretation in cross-national studies (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Prior research has highlighted that ethnic classifications vary widely, often reflecting local political and cultural meanings, and therefore pose significant challenges for reliable international comparisons (Connelly et al., 2016; Silver & Dowley, 2000). To preserve validity and interpretive clarity, demographic analyses were limited to variables with consistent cross-national coding.

It is difficult to claim that the data fully represent the global working population, and even when compared with World Bank and International Labour Organisation statistics (International Labour Organization, n.d.; World Bank, 2025), this remains problematic. Nevertheless, the statistics do reflect the diverse demographic backgrounds of participants in the World Values Survey. This heterogeneity provides a robust foundation for subsequent analyses of attitudes across variations in socioeconomic and demographic contexts.

Correlation analysis

Table 2 below presents the results of a Pearson correlation analysis.

Table 2: Correlation analysis

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Workplace Bias	1				
2. Media Source	-.17*	1			
3. Diversity Exclusion	.35*	-.12*	1		
4. Professional Membership	-.04*	.16*	.00	1	
5. Social Membership	.02*	.14*	.01	.63*	1

*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Effect sizes were interpreted using Cohen's (1988) guidelines: correlations of approximately .10 were considered small, .30 medium, and .50 large. Workplace Bias Index (high = more bias); Media Source Index (high = more media accessed / frequent access); Exclusionary Attitudes toward Diversity (high = more bias); Professional Membership Index (0=none, 2=active in all); Social Membership Index (0=none, 2=active in all).

Results indicated that workplace bias was positively correlated with diversity exclusion ($r = .35$, $p < .01$), reflecting a medium effect size, and negatively correlated with media use ($r = –.17$, $p < .01$), consistent with a small-to-medium effect size. The more groups respondents reported disliking, the higher their workplace bias; conversely, greater media use was associated with lower levels of workplace bias.

Workplace bias was also negatively but weakly associated with professional membership ($r = –.04$, $p < .01$) and positively but slightly related to social membership ($r = .02$, $p < .01$). These effect sizes were negligible and warrant little attention.

Although not central to the research objectives, it is noteworthy that media use was positively associated with both professional ($r = .16$, $p < .01$) and social membership ($r = .14$, $p < .01$), consistent with small effect sizes, and negatively related to diversity exclusion ($r = –.12$, $p < .01$). Professional and social membership were strongly correlated ($r = .63$, $p < .01$), indicating a large effect size and substantial overlap between these two forms of engagement.

Thus, taken together, the correlation analyses suggest that workplace bias is most strongly related to broader exclusionary social attitudes. At the same time, greater media engagement shows a modest association with reduced workplace bias.

Multiple regression analysis

Table 3 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis. The Media Source Index, Diversity Exclusion Index, Social Membership Index, and Professional Membership Index were entered as independent variables, with Workplace Bias specified as the dependent variable.

Table 3: Multiple regression analysis, main indexes and workplace bias

Predictor	B	95% CI (B)	SE	*β*	*t*	*P*
Constant	1.59	[1.55, 1.62]	0.02	—	90.84	< .001
Media Source Index	-0.10	[-0.10, -0.09]	0.00	-0.13	-32.75	< .001
Diversity Exclusion	0.87	[0.85, 0.89]	0.01	0.33	83.67	< .001
Professional Membership	-0.11	[-0.12, -0.09]	0.01	-0.07	-14.13	< .001
Social Membership	0.13	[0.12, 0.15]	0.01	0.08	16.47	< .001

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether media use, diversity exclusion, professional membership, and social membership predicted workplace bias. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(4, 56{,}362) = 2309.32$, $p < .001$, with $R = .38$, $R^2 = .14$, and Adjusted $R^2 = .14$, indicating that the predictors together explained 14% of the variance in workplace bias.

The regression results aligned closely with the correlation analyses. Exclusionary attitudes toward diversity emerged as a statistically significant predictor ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$), with higher levels of social exclusion associated with greater workplace bias. Media use was also a significant negative predictor ($\beta = –.13$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater media engagement was associated with lower workplace bias. Professional membership demonstrated a small negative association ($\beta = –.07$, $p < .001$), suggesting that involvement in professional organisations corresponds with slightly reduced workplace bias. By contrast, social membership showed a small positive association ($\beta = .08$, $p < .001$), indicating that greater participation in religious, recreational, or civic organisations was modestly linked with increased workplace bias.

Using effect sizes in the correlation analyses may provide a more effective indication of the relative importance of predictors, since regression coefficients reflect the influence of each variable while accounting for the simultaneous inclusion of all predictors in the model.

Overall, the results highlight that exclusionary social attitudes remain the most prominent predictor of workplace bias. At the same time, media engagement and professional organisational involvement are associated with modest reductions in bias, and social memberships may, in some contexts, increase bias.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the predictors of workplace bias among employed individuals using data from the World Values Survey Wave 7. It focused on four key areas: exclusionary social attitudes, media exposure, professional memberships, and social memberships. The results provide a clear understanding of how attitudinal, informational, and affiliation factors collectively influence bias in the professional workplace environment.

Firstly, as expected, exclusionary attitudes towards diversity emerged as the strongest predictor of workplace bias, demonstrating a moderate-to-strong positive correlation. This finding confirms that prejudice in the workplace is deeply rooted in broader societal views toward marginalised groups rather than in workplace dynamics alone. Individuals who expressed greater discomfort with diversity, especially those who endorsed social distance from minorities, were more likely to support biased views in the workplace. These findings are consistent with global research that identifies exclusionary worldviews as stable psychological and cultural predecessors to discrimination in employment settings (Dhanani et al., 2018; Gündemir et al., 2017) and highlight evidence that intolerance towards sexual, religious, or ethnic minorities is a significant driver of workplace inequality (Heilman et al., 2024; Salari et al., 2024).

Secondly, media exposure was found to be significantly associated with workplace bias. Individuals who frequently engage with diverse media sources tend to hold less biased views in the workplace. One possible explanation is that exposure to varied media broadens informational horizons and fosters contact with counter-stereotypical narratives, which aligns with contact theory and media diversity theory (Bail et al., 2018; Ramasubramanian, 2015). Although the effect size was modest, it indicates that media environments can subtly shape social cognition and influence whether exclusionary schemas are reinforced or challenged, depending on the diversity of exposure.

Thirdly, two contrasting patterns emerged regarding organisational memberships. Professional membership was negatively correlated with workplace bias, suggesting that participation in professional or occupational associations may foster inclusivity. These organisations often include ethical codes, diversity standards, and mechanisms for peer accountability that discourage overt prejudice (Genkova & Schreiber, 2022). In contrast, social membership in religious, recreational, or civic groups showed a small positive association with workplace bias. This pattern aligns with previous evidence indicating that some social networks reinforce traditional or exclusionary norms, particularly when groups are ideologically homogeneous (Hatch et al., 2022; Rowatt & Al-Kire, 2021).

Overall, these findings indicate that workplace bias is not random or purely situational; instead, it is primarily rooted in enduring exclusionary attitudes, with contextual influences from information and group affiliation playing secondary roles. The model accounted for 14% of the variance in workplace bias, highlighting

that while attitudinal and social factors explain a significant portion of bias, other unmeasured factors, such as organisational culture, policy enforcement, and interpersonal experiences, are likely contributing as well.

Theoretical and practical implications

The findings reveal that workplace bias is primarily influenced by broader exclusionary social attitudes, with media exposure and organisational affiliations also playing important roles. This supports theories such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2019) and Integrated Threat Theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), which indicate that individuals favour their own groups and perceive out-groups as threats, contributing to bias in professional settings. Discriminatory attitudes in the workplace reflect societal prejudices rather than isolated organisational issues. The study enhances our understanding of bias by integrating attitudinal, informational, and affiliation factors into a single model. The moderate relationship between exclusionary attitudes and workplace bias shows that prejudice is often rooted in internalised social norms. Contextual experiences, such as diverse information and organisational culture, can either reinforce or challenge these biases.

Practically, the findings suggest several intervention strategies. First, diversity and inclusion initiatives should focus on actively challenging exclusionary beliefs, particularly regarding gender, sexuality, religion, and migration. Training programs that combine contact-based learning, empathy development, and awareness of reflective bias are likely more effective than short-term workshops. Secondly, leveraging digital media to promote inclusion can reduce stereotyping. Organisations and policymakers should invest in campaigns that encourage exposure to diverse content and improve media literacy to counter misinformation.

Lastly, professional organisations can help embed ethical standards that discourage bias, while some social groups may reinforce exclusionary norms. Strengthening the inclusivity of professional associations and integrating equity principles into training programs could yield significant benefits. In summary, combating workplace bias requires simultaneous interventions at the societal, organisational, and informational levels to create environments where fairness, representation, and equity are lived realities.

Limitations and recommended future research

The study utilised a large and diverse cross-national dataset, but several limitations must be acknowledged. First, relying on self-reported attitudinal measures rather than behavioural data limits our ability to infer how bias manifests in workplace behaviour accurately. Although the variables considered (e.g., exclusionary attitudes, media exposure) provide valuable psychological insights, they do not fully capture enacted discrimination or structural barriers, which may explain why the model accounted for only a moderate proportion of variance in workplace bias.

Second, the lack of harmonised cross-national measures of ethnicity complicates the analysis of racialised bias. Different coding systems in the World Values Survey hinder global comparisons (Connelly et al., 2016). This study prioritised consistently coded variables, such as gender and occupational status, which may have limited exploration of context-specific identity dynamics.

Third, cross-national aggregation can obscure local nuances. Historical legacies and social hierarchies shape how exclusionary attitudes affect workplace bias (Inglehart, 2018). In formerly colonised regions, for instance, systemic discrimination still impacts organisational structures (Nyamnjoh, 2019), while in Western contexts, bias may appear in subtler forms (Quillian & Lee, 2023).

Future research should adopt multi-level and mixed-method designs, integrating individual attitudes with organisational and national indicators. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to determine whether changes in social attitudes or media exposure reduce workplace bias. Intersectional approaches should explore how various identity dimensions interact to shape exclusionary attitudes.

Finally, qualitative studies in specific cultural and occupational contexts could help clarify how professional and social memberships influence norms and may promote inclusion.

Conclusion

In sum, the study shows that workplace bias is shaped by social attitudes, information environments, and professional memberships rather than being random or inevitable. It highlights the challenges and opportunities for reducing bias globally. While exclusionary attitudes persist, inclusive media, professional affiliations, and strategic organisational efforts can lead to more equitable workplaces. Recognising these factors is essential for creating fair institutions that encourage innovation and reflect societal diversity.

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