

BIAS OR NO BIAS?

1. EXAMPLE 1 UNLAWFUL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Charmaine, a mother of two preschool-age children, files an EEOC charge alleging sex discrimination after she is rejected for an opening in her employer's executive training program. The employer asserts that it rejected Charmaine because candidates who were selected had better performance appraisals or more managerial experience and because she is not "executive material." The employer also contends that the fact that half of the selectees were women shows that her rejection could not have been because of sex. However, the investigation reveals that Charmaine had more managerial experience or better performance appraisals than several selectees and was better qualified than some selectees, including both men and women, as weighted pursuant to the employer's written selection policy. In addition, while the employer selected both men and women for the program, the only selectees with preschool age children were men. Under the circumstances, the investigator determines that Charmaine was subjected to discrimination based on her sex.

Title VII does not prohibit discrimination based solely on parental or other caregiver status, so an employer does not generally violate Title VII's disparate treatment proscription if, for example, it treats working mothers and working fathers in a similar unfavorable (or favorable) manner as compared to childless workers.

EXAMPLE 2 UNLAWFUL STEREOTYPING DURING HIRING PROCESS

Patricia, a recent business school graduate, was interviewed for a position as a marketing assistant for a public relations firm. At the interview, Bob, the manager of the department with the vacancy being filled, noticed Patricia's wedding ring and asked, "How many kids do you have?" Patricia told Bob that she had no children yet but that she planned to once she and her husband had gotten their careers underway. Bob explained that the duties of a marketing assistant are very demanding, and rather than discuss Patricia's qualifications, he asked how she would balance work and childcare responsibilities when the need arose. Patricia explained that she would share childcare responsibilities with her husband, but Bob responded that men are not reliable caregivers. Bob later told his secretary that he was concerned about hiring a young married woman – he thought she might have kids, and he didn't believe that being a mother was "compatible with a fast-paced business environment." A week after the interview, Patricia was notified that she was not hired.

Believing that she was well qualified and that the interviewer's questions reflected gender bias, Patricia filed a sex discrimination charge with the EEOC. The investigator discovered that the employer reposted the position after rejecting Patricia. The employer said that it reposted the position because it was not satisfied with the experience level of the applicants in the first round. However, the investigation showed that Patricia easily met the requirements for the position and had as much experience as some other individuals recently hired as marketing assistants. Under the circumstances, the investigator determines that the respondent rejected Patricia from the first round of hiring because of sex-based stereotypes in violation of Title VII.

Mixed-motives Cases

An employer violates Title VII if the charging party's sex was a motivating factor in the challenged employment decision, regardless of whether the employer was also motivated by legitimate business reasons.⁵⁴ However, when an employer shows that it would have taken the same action even absent the discriminatory motive, the complaining employee will not be entitled to reinstatement, back pay, or damages.⁵⁵

EXAMPLE 3 DECISION MOTIVATED BY BOTH UNLAWFUL STEREOTYPING AND LEGITIMATE BUSINESS REASON

Same facts as above except that the employer did not repost the position but rather hired Tom from the same round of candidates that Patricia was in. In addition, the record showed that other than Tom's greater experience, Tom and Patricia had similar qualifications but that the employer consistently used relevant experience as a tiebreaking factor in filling marketing positions. The investigator determines that the employer has violated Title VII because sex was a motivating factor in the employer's decision not to hire Patricia as evidenced by Bob's focus on caregiving responsibilities, rather than qualifications, when he interviewed Patricia and other female candidates. However, the employer would have selected Tom, even absent the discriminatory motive, based on his greater experience. Thus, Patricia may be entitled to attorney's fees and/or injunctive relief, but is not entitled to reinstatement, back pay, or compensatory or punitive damages.

Assumptions About the Work Performance of Female Caregivers

The effects of stereotypes may be compounded after female employees become pregnant or actually begin assuming caregiving responsibilities. For example, employers may make the stereotypical assumptions that women with young children will (or should) not work long hours and that new mothers are less committed to their jobs than they were before they had children.⁵⁶ Relying on such stereotypes, some employers may deny female caregivers opportunities based on assumptions about how they might balance work and family responsibilities. Employers may further stereotype female caregivers who adopt part-time or flexible work schedules as "homemakers" who are less committed to the workplace than their full-time colleagues.⁵⁷ Adverse employment decisions based on such sex-based assumptions or

speculation, rather than on the specific work performance of a particular employee, violate Title VII.

1. EXAMPLE 4
UNLAWFUL SEX-BASED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WORK
PERFORMANCE

Anjuli, a police detective, had received glowing performance reviews during her first four years with the City's police department and was assumed to be on a fast track for promotion. However, after she returned from leave to adopt a child during her fifth year with the department, her supervisor frequently asked how Anjuli was going to manage to stay on top of her case load while caring for an infant. Although Anjuli continued to work the same hours and close as many cases as she had before the adoption, her supervisor pointed out that none of her superiors were mothers, and he removed her from her high-profile cases, assigning her smaller, more routine cases normally handled by inexperienced detectives. The City has violated Title VII by treating Anjuli less favorably because of gender-based stereotypes about working mothers.

1. EXAMPLE 5
EMPLOYMENT DECISION LAWFULLY BASED ON
ACTUAL WORK PERFORMANCE

After Carla, an associate in a law firm, returned from maternity leave, she began missing work frequently because of her difficulty in obtaining childcare and was unable to meet several important deadlines. As a result, the firm lost a big client, and Carla was given a written warning about her performance. Carla's continued childcare difficulties resulted in her missing further deadlines for several important projects. Two months after Carla was given the written warning, the firm transferred her to another department, where she would be excluded from most high-profile cases but would perform work that has fewer time constraints. Carla filed a charge alleging sex discrimination. The investigation revealed that Carla was treated comparably to other employees, both male and female, who had missed deadlines on high-profile projects or otherwise performed unsatisfactorily and had failed to improve within a reasonable period of time. Therefore, the employer did not violate Title VII by transferring Carla.

Consider this:

1. "Benevolent" Stereotyping

Adverse employment decisions based on gender stereotypes are sometimes well-intentioned and perceived by the employer as being in the employee's best interest.⁵⁸ For example, an employer might assume that a working mother would not want to relocate to another city, even if it would mean a promotion.⁵⁹ Of course, adverse actions that are based on sex stereotyping violate Title VII, even if the employer is not acting out of hostility.⁶⁰

EXAMPLE 6 STEREOTYPING UNLAWFUL EVEN IF FOR BENEVOLENT REASONS

Rhonda, a CPA at a mid-size accounting firm, mentioned to her boss that she had become the guardian of her niece and nephew and they were coming to live with her, so she would need a few days off to help them settle in. Rhonda's boss expressed concern that Rhonda would be unable to balance her new family responsibilities with her demanding career, and was worried that Rhonda would suffer from stress and exhaustion. Two weeks later, he moved her from her lead position on three of the firm's biggest accounts and assigned her to supporting roles handling several smaller accounts. In doing so, the boss told Rhonda that he was transferring her so that she "would have more time to spend with her new family," despite the fact that Rhonda had asked for no additional leave and had been completing her work in a timely and satisfactory manner. At the end of the year, Rhonda, for the first time in her 7-year stint at the firm, is denied a pay raise, even though many other workers did receive raises. When she asks for an explanation, she is told that she needs to be available to work on bigger accounts if she wants to receive raises. Here, the employer has engaged in unlawful sex discrimination by taking an adverse action against a female employee based on stereotypical assumptions about women with caregiving responsibilities, even if the employer believed that it was acting in the employee's best interest.

In some circumstances, an employer will take an action that unlawfully imposes on a female worker the employer's own stereotypical views of how the worker *should* act even though the employer is aware that the worker objects. Thus, if a supervisor believes that mothers should not work full time, he or she might refuse to consider a working mother for a promotion that would involve a substantial increase in hours, even if that worker has made it clear that she would accept the promotion if offered.

EXAMPLE 7

DENIAL OF PROMOTION BASED ON STEREOTYPE OF HOW MOTHERS SHOULD ACT

Sun, a mid-level manager in a data services company, applied for a promotion to a newly created upper-level management position. At the interview for the promotion, the selecting official, Charlie, who had never met Sun before, asked her about her childcare responsibilities. Sun explained that she had two teenage children and that she commuted every week between her home in New York and the employer's main office in Northern Virginia. Charlie asked Sun how her husband handled the fact that she was "away from home so much, not caring for the family except on weekends." Sun explained that her husband and their children "helped each other" to function as "a successful family," but Charlie responded that he had "a very difficult time understanding why any man would allow his wife to live away from home during the work week." After Sun is denied the promotion, she files an EEOC charge alleging sex discrimination. According to the employer, it considered Sun and one other candidate for the promotion, and, although they were both well qualified, it did not select Sun because it felt that it was unfair to Sun's children for their mother to work so far from home. Under the circumstances, the investigator determines that the employer denied Sun the promotion because of unlawful sex discrimination, basing its decision in particular on stereotypes that women with children

should not live away from home during the week.⁶¹