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## **Making the tea or making it to the top? How gender stereotypes impact women fundraisers' careers**

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**Voluntary Sector Review Special Issue - 'Critical Theory, Qualitative Methods, and the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector'**

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### **Keywords**

Fundraising, women, feminist analysis, gender discrimination, sexual harassment

### **Abstract**

This paper explores gender stereotypes, discrimination, and harassment in the fundraising profession and their impact on women's fundraising careers. Using a feminist analysis, we investigate the types of gender-based stereotyping and harassment experienced by women who are members of the UK professional fundraising membership body, where 75% of women survey respondents reported experiencing stereotyping. Qualitative analysis of 366 respondents' examples of gender-based stereotyping and data from three focus groups demonstrate how the fundraising profession is gendered, its impact on women, and what actions need to be taken to tackle visible and unseen barriers that affect women's careers. We conclude by emphasising the necessity for researchers to investigate nonprofit and voluntary organizations with a critical orientation that accounts for the ways power is reinforced along categories of gender, age, race, class, physical ability and sexuality in order to realise the full potential of individual employees and the sector.

Women have long dominated the global nonprofit sector workforce, occupying both paid and unpaid voluntary roles (Anheier 2014; Prochaska 1990), however women's dominance in fundraising is a more recent phenomenon. Whilst fundraising has existed as a paid career for a century, it wasn't until the 1980s that it became a majority-female profession (Conry 1998). In the UK, 76% of fundraisers are women (Institute of Fundraising, 2019), similar to the USA, where 73% of the fundraising workforce is women, up from 55% in 1996 (Nathan & Tempel 2017).

Despite women's outsized presence in the sector, scholars have documented a persistent pattern of an elite, male power structure in nonprofit organisations, where men are more likely to occupy top leadership roles, work in larger and more prestigious organisations, and receive higher pay (Damman, Heyse, & Mills 2014; Gibelman 2000; Nank 2011; Sampson & Moore 2008). This translates to a "glass ceiling" for women (Gibelman 2000; Moore & Whitt 2000) and a "glass escalator" for men, whereby men experience rapid promotion into leadership roles, especially in a female-dominated profession (Williams, 1992 as cited in Damman et al. 2014).

Nickels and Leach (2021) argue that as more Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) and more white women move into positions of leadership in the nonprofit sector, it continues to be a "white, masculine space." They write, "Who is in the room matters; but it is not enough to have more people if their voices are minimized, muted, or later erased. The conditions—values, norms, and processes—also matter!" (Nickels & Leach 2021, p. 2). They join other scholars in calling for nonprofit research grounded in a critical approach that centres the lived experiences of women and BIPOC to "raise consciousness about past and present oppressions and demonstrate a qualitatively different future" (Coule, Dodge, & Eikenberry 2020, p. 5).

We take their call as our charge: while a number of studies have looked at gender in the nonprofit sector, few have taken a feminist approach that centres women's voices and goes beyond statistics to analyse women's equity and inclusion in professional roles. Women's route to leadership positions continues to be more problematic, and often more challenging, than men's, regardless of their occupational field. Scholars have documented the phenomenon that often, in order to reach leadership positions, a woman must "act like a man," but then she simultaneously is criticized for transgressing her normative gender role (Vasavada 2012). More difficult to conceptualize is the number of women who never reach leadership—either because they are passed over for promotion or choose to opt-out, recognizing the cultural, social, and structural difficulties they would potentially face.

Nonprofits are not immune to oppressive societal structures, such as patriarchy, racism, and classism, which shape institutions, decision-making, and organisational culture (Nickels & Leach 2021; Riley 2021). For example, in response to the #MeToo movement, #AidToo emerged to document the pervasive male dominance and sexual harassment in the international aid sector (Riley 2021). In 2018, the annual Presidents Club's charity dinner in the UK made headlines when reporters went undercover as hostesses at an elite, all-male fundraising event to document the commodification of women's sexuality in the name of charity (Marriage 2018). Women's paths to professional success also involve additional hurdles created by broader social norms, like care-giving and child-rearing, that disproportionately fall to women and have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Chung et al. 2021).

This article examines the experiences of UK fundraisers—both staff and leaders—and the challenges facing women who aspire to leadership positions in the sector. We use a feminist research approach that foregrounds women's experiences (Skeggs 2001) and uncovers the ways women are stereotyped and sexualized in fundraising roles, and face an

intersection of oppressions based on their age, race, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Using qualitative survey data (N = 790) and focus groups with 15 women fundraisers, our analysis demonstrates the ways a patriarchal socio-cultural system devalues women's work, manifests in the day-to-day experiences of fundraisers, and impacts the ability of women to progress in the profession. Because feminist research recognizes the ability of marginalized individuals to provide counter narratives (Nickels & Leach 2021), we also discuss the agency of women fundraisers to support one another in addressing these patterns and offer recommendations for how nonprofit organisations can enact equality.

### **Two strands of literature: Feminist analysis and nonprofit scholarship**

While feminist scholars have produced a rich literature on gender, work, and organisations (see Acker, 1990; Anker, 2001), feminist analysis in nonprofit sector scholarship is more limited (Themudo 2009). Like Hinterhuber's (2014) critique of how civil society scholars have treated gender (as cited in Holgersson & Hvenmark 2019), nonprofit scholarship usually treats gender as a demographic variable without considering attendant issues of power, male hegemony, or gender inequality. Coule et al.'s (2020) review of 40 years of nonprofit scholarship finds only 14 articles with a feminist critique or that centre gender, but most do not provide a normative critique. However, growing interest among critical nonprofit scholars has started to bring close examination to the ways "racism, sexism, and heteronormativity pervade the sector—in service to the maintenance of white supremacy and patriarchy" (Nickels & Leach 2021, p. 1), catching up to Black women activists who have both named and critiqued the contemporary nonprofit industrial complex for over a decade (INCITE! 2007).

Fundraising, like almost all nonprofit activity, takes place in a world that is structured by patriarchy and gender inequality. Despite notions of nonprofits as morally righteous or

inherently “good” based on their missions to improve society, like all organisations, they reproduce hierarchies of race, class, age, gender, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Further, the institutions of “whiteness” and “masculinity” are often reinforced through rhetoric of “colour-blindness” and “gender-blindness” that obscures who holds privilege and power in the sector (Heckler 2019). Contemporary feminist research often examines how the patriarchal mode of production is socially constructed, producing a gendered division of labour and devaluing care-related work (Kynaston 1996). A disproportionate number of occupations typically identified as women’s work take place in nonprofits, including social work, nursing, and child and elder care. This is also reflective of historical occupational patterns that constrain women to “reproductive” rather than “productive” roles (Acker 1990; Odendahl, 2006).

In nonprofit research, the societal patterns and structures governing race, gender, age, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation are rarely investigated, though scholars have started engaging different critical theories to explore facets of the charitable sector (see Eikenberry, Mirabella & Sandberg 2019). Feminist theory is just one area of critical thought, joining postmodern and post-structural theory, critical race theory, and post-colonial theory among others. Additionally, feminist theory is not a singular theory, but builds on the work of many scholars who are concerned with “the exclusion of women’s voices and the gendered structures of power in organizations and social structures” (Eikenberry et al. 2019, p.4). What is most important about critical feminist theory is that it enables emancipatory political action that seeks to transform society (Gannon & Davies 2012). Though a review of feminist thought is beyond the scope of this paper, we also acknowledge the work of Black feminists, who rightfully critiqued “mainstream” feminist theory for its exclusion of non-white scholarship and lack of concern for women of colour, and the pivotal theory of intersectionality that examine the intersections of multiple social categories (e.g. race, class,

gender) and represent interlocking systems of privilege and power (Crenshaw 1989; Launius & Hassel 2014).

Feminist scholars often study how elite male power structures are manifested and reproduced in all aspects of social life, as well as the consequences of those structures on the lived experiences of women. Thus, we have presented a feminist framework to explicitly situate our study of women fundraisers and their experiences of stereotyping and harassment. Finally, one of the benefits critical feminist theory offers is that it believes these structures are mutable, or able to be changed, and recognises individuals' agency to challenge the status quo and imagine new ways of organizing, working, and even being, for a more equitable future (Gannon & Davies 2012).

### **Women, leadership, and the nonprofit sector**

Whilst little contemporary scholarship has analysed the nonprofit sector with an explicit feminist lens, research confirms the presence of an elite male power structure in the sector, where men are overrepresented in leadership and receive higher compensation (AFP 2019; Gibelman 2000; Mesch & Rooney 2008; Sampson & Moore 2008). Several studies explain that gender-based pay and promotion gaps in the nonprofit sector are due to occupational sex-segregation and find that female-dominated occupations also have relatively fewer positions of authority (Damman et al. 2014; Faulk et al. 2013). Yet this same literature gives few hints of the effects of gender discrimination and the barriers it creates on individual women's careers.

Women have long formed the core of the global nonprofit "workforce" (Anheier 2014; Prochaska 1990), taking unpaid positions that have provided "parallel power structures" for women to participate in public life while adhering to traditional gender roles (McCarthy 1990). McCarthy's (1990; 2001) historical accounts of women's voluntary sector

work provide important context as they demonstrate two issues of feminist concern: 1) that even in the creation of new nonprofits, women were entering “male” spaces; and 2) those same women had agency within those spaces to claim power over missions, manage money, and provide services, resisting established power structures. Vasavada (2012) demonstrates the challenges women leaders in Indian nonprofits face, particularly when they enact feminine leadership approaches. In the U.S., women of colour in the nonprofit sector face even more hurdles to advancement, a result of both being left out or ignored, and being “hyper-visible and under intense scrutiny” (Biu 2019). While women may be a much more visible part of nonprofits today, the gendered and racialized nature of the sector persists even if the manifestations are subtler. In fact, such experiences can potentially be even more difficult to change, as they are often discounted for their subtlety, evoking claims of overreaction, or just unacknowledged as “part of the job.”

While studies have documented both a gender and racial leadership and pay gap in the nonprofit sector, they often examine conditions on a macro-level, contributing to the erasure of women’s lived experiences. Holgersson and Hvenmark’s (2019) analysis of nonprofit leadership handbooks finds that gender is most often treated as male/neutral or a variable, but not as an analytical category connected to the inequalities women face. We sought a different approach: combining the power of quantitative data to document patterns and pervasiveness, and highlighting individuals’ qualitative stories to more fully understand the ways gender (and to a lesser extent, other identities) shape women’s experiences. Nickels and Leach (2021) argue that such counter-narratives can serve as a corrective to “majoritarian” nonprofit research and provide a way to reclaim power and agency. We also engage our positionality as two white, able-bodied women academics, one heterosexual, one lesbian, who have had significant experience as fundraisers in the nonprofit sector. Thus, we align ourselves with the position that a collaborative outcome between researcher and



researched is more likely when women study women with whom they have similar socio-demographic characteristics and experiences (Legard, Keegan & Ward 2003).

### **The experiences of women fundraisers**

Fundraisers provide mission-critical financial resources for nonprofit organisations and serve as boundary-spanners between donors and organizations (Dale 2017). However, fundraising has struggled to attain professional status and be valued within charities as well as amongst the general public (Duronio & Tempel 1997; Breeze 2017). Philanthropy is typically conceptualised “as a world of donors” (Ostrander & Schervish 1990, p. 67), which obscures fundraisers’ critical roles. Beaton et al. (2021) argue that, in their boundary-spanning role, fundraisers may be more subject to exploitation due to their donor-dependent work. Because fundraising requires relationship-building and intimacy, and often takes place in social spaces as well as in donors’ homes, embedded power differentials can be a breeding ground for inappropriate behaviour (Beaton et al. 2021).

When fundraising emerged as a profession at the start of the twentieth century it was a principally male workforce yet it is now female-dominated (Breeze 2017; Duronio and Tempel 1997). The implications of that shift in gender composition, coupled with the nonprofit setting, which carries expectations of higher standards of behaviour in a sector expressly committed to making the world a better place (Rendon 2021), prompts the need to examine the fundraisers’ perspective. Further, a feminist perspective foregrounds women’s experiences and concerns which are otherwise marginalised or made invisible (Holgersson & Hvenmark 2019). Gender theory may serve to best explain not only the feminisation of the profession, but also why the activity of fundraising has maintained a low status, and why fundraisers are frequently discounted as unskilled and problematic “beggars” (Breeze & Scaife 2015, p. 571). We believe that meaningful change, such as creating greater equality in

leadership opportunities, depends on critical analysis of the power imbalances within charities that enable and allow stereotyping and gender discrimination to take place.

### **A feminist research approach**

While feminist researchers use a variety of methods, common tenets of feminist research include a power-sharing approach between researchers and participants, researchers' engagement in reflexivity on their role in the research process, centring participants' perspectives, and incorporating an action or praxis orientation (Bryman 2016; Olesen 2011). We believe that for research to be feminist, the research question needs to focus on "an issue of interest to feminists" and that "the interpretation and application of results are done in a way that attempts to advance feminist values" (Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne 2007, p. 304). Feminist scholars often embrace interviewing in their studies, allowing for participants' voices to be heard, but can also use survey research or a combination of methods (Bryman 2016; Legard et al. 2003; Miner-Rubino & Jayaratne 2007). Another strategy developed by critical race scholars is counter-storytelling, which relies on qualitative research to discuss how people's experiences are racialised, sexualised, and classed, in order to disrupt established centres of power (Solórzano & Yosso 2002). Our study presents women fundraisers' experiences as counter-stories, to reveal the ongoing struggles women face in the profession and challenge the view that women simply are not interested in leadership roles.

In keeping with our feminist ethic, we began this project at the urging of active women fundraisers who were concerned with diversity, equity, and inclusion in the profession. With support from the UK's Institute of Fundraising, we established a steering committee of women fundraisers to assist us in guiding our research and providing feedback throughout our study, including developing implications for practice. In order to reach a large and diverse sample of fundraisers, we fielded an online survey. In our survey introduction,

we were explicit that we were concerned with gender disparities in the profession and encouraged both men and women to participate.

The survey was distributed to the c.6,000 fundraisers who are members of the UK's Institute of Fundraising (790 completed surveys thus represents a 13% participation rate). This ensured our sampling frame had extensive reach across both geography and cause area, but it omitted those fundraisers working in nonprofit organisations that cannot afford, or choose not to join the profession's membership body. Women were overrepresented in the survey comprising 91% of the respondents, which is in line with – though overstates – the general overrepresentation of women in this profession, who comprise 76% of the UK workforce (Institute of Fundraising 2019). We also conducted three focus groups in Autumn 2019 (pre-COVID-19) with 15 women fundraisers to provide them an opportunity to share their experiences and discuss their meanings collectively. Combined, these methods resulted in quantitative data about the prevalence of stereotypes and harassment, as well as the detailed experiences that women fundraisers faced. Finally, we brought our data and emerging findings back to the steering committee for their discussion and input, demonstrating our commitment to reciprocity.

The survey included 70 questions on a wide range of topics, including pathways into fundraising; career progression and leadership ambitions; workplace culture, policies, and practices; how fundraisers felt their gender affected their career; and their experiences of being stereotyped and facing gender discrimination. While the majority of the questions were closed-ended, the survey included four open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their experiences.

We define stereotyping as “the unconscious or conscious application of (accurate or inaccurate) knowledge of a group in judging a member of the group” (Banaji & Greenwalk, 1994, p. 58). We focused our question on stereotypes because they are relatively common,

often invoked unconsciously, applied without intention, and have a more significant cumulative effect than any single decision (Agars, 2004). The survey asked respondents if they had experienced stereotyping and/or preconceptions based on their gender. If a participant responded affirmatively, they were provided an open-ended question: 'Can you provide any examples of being stereotyped, or experiencing preconceptions based on your gender in your fundraising role?' We worded the question in this way because we recognize that gender stereotypes, and not just sexual harassment or overt discrimination, can impact professional success (Heilman 2012 and because many people may not have experienced behaviour they would categorize as explicit discrimination, or that meets the legal standards of sexual harassment. Scholars note that both the legal definition and socio-psychological understandings of what constitutes sexual harassment have continued to expand and that sex-based discrimination may have little to do with sexuality but everything to do with gender (Cortina and Berdahl 2008).

Second, we held three focus groups in the UK cities of Edinburgh, Newcastle, and Canterbury (intentionally reaching beyond the capital city of London), with 15 existing and aspiring women fundraising leaders. The focus group recruitment strategy combined purposive and snowball sampling, where we worked with intermediaries such as local community foundations, to identify potential participants. Most focus group participants had already completed the survey so were familiar with the project, but before commencing we provided an additional information sheet setting out the purpose and format of the focus groups and obtained informed consent. We sought – and achieved – a mixture of current and aspiring women fundraising leaders. Focus group participants were diverse in age, ethnicity, physical abilities, professional experience, and diverse caring commitments (e.g. children, aging parents) outside of work. The goal of this element of the research was to explore women's career progressions and ambitions, with a focus on the extrinsic and intrinsic

barriers to women achieving leadership positions, and to identify solutions to those barriers.

Each focus group was focused around two principal questions:

- What has been most helpful in progressing your career to date?
- What has encouraged you, or put you off, applying for leadership positions?

All focus groups ran for at least 90 minutes and one for as long 120 minutes, and some participants stayed even longer to continue their conversations and exchange contact information. We note below how the continuation of the discussion and support beyond the formal research encounter highlights women fundraisers' inherent agency.

A full presentation of the survey results is available elsewhere (Breeze and Dale 2020); here, we draw on the 366 individuals' examples of gender stereotyping as well as the qualitative data from the three focus groups. We engaged in qualitative thematic analysis (Bryman 2016) that sought to catalogue and group different types of stereotyping together to construct themes and to denote how often certain experiences were shared. The researchers initially engaged in separate coding of a portion of the data, following an *in vivo* approach and then met to compare codes and construct a code book. The process of individual and joint coding continued until all data from the survey had been coded, resulting in the identification of three main themes, and an over-arching finding of intersectionality, or the ways participants' gender and other personal identities constructed different experiences. The author who conducted the focus groups then applied the same coding to the focus group transcripts, resulting in the final finding related to fundraisers' agency. Codes were then grouped into larger themes that described different stereotypes and kinds of discrimination that women experienced. Unless it is indicated that a quote comes from the focus group element of the research, all quotes in the following sections are from the survey.

### **Survey and Focus Group Findings**

Among the survey respondents, 75% of women fundraisers reported experiencing gender-based stereotyping in their role compared to 59% men. While both rates of stereotyping were high, women were more likely to report experiencing stereotyping from board members and donors, the two most powerful ‘third party’ stakeholder groups in charities (Beaton et al. 2021), whereas men were more likely to say they experienced stereotyping by colleagues. Women were also significantly more likely to say these experiences have affected their aspirations to achieve leadership positions (Author’s own 2020). With these overall findings in mind, we turn to our analysis of the qualitative responses and focus group data about the experiences of women fundraisers.

### *Fundraisers’ experiences of gender discrimination*

A total of 366 fundraisers provided detailed responses to the open-ended question: ‘Can you provide any examples of being stereotyped, or experiencing preconceptions based on your gender in your fundraising role?’ Their responses covered a wide range of experiences, which we grouped into three themes: (1) gendered assumptions about women fundraisers in relation to normative female characteristics and life-course expectations; (2) questioning and undermining women’s professionalism; and (3) experiences of ‘everyday’ sexism and sexual harassment. We then discuss the impact of these stereotypes and harassment on women’s careers in fundraising.

### Theme 1: Gendered assumptions that fundraisers will embody ‘women’s roles’ and display ‘female’ characteristics

The most numerous examples of gender stereotypes faced by study participants related to assumptions that they would meet normative expectations as women, including having and raising children, which was thought to impact their commitment to their fundraising role; being married to a higher-earning man thereby devaluing their paid role; and being willing and equipped to undertake workplace tasks that are gendered female, such as making the tea and taking meeting minutes.

Survey participants shared almost 80 different examples of facing questions or assumptions about their fertility and family in the workplace. These included being asked if they have, or intend to have, children and if they plan to resume their careers after having children. Such questions were raised by managers, colleagues, donors and—despite it being illegal—during job interviews. For example, a woman in her 40s who works for a medium-sized charity gave the example of “being asked ‘do I have any major life events planned’ whilst having a conversation about my career development. This happened twice by two separate males [managers].” Such questions can also come from donors, as a woman under the age of 30 who works in a large charity explained:

*“Supporters regularly ask me if I have children yet and when I say no, either reassure me it will happen soon (I don’t want children) or warn me of the dangers of leaving it much longer due to decreasing fertility.”*

Despite the pervasiveness of assumptions around women’s childbearing, women also reported that while entry-level fundraising jobs provided “flexibility and freedom,” leadership roles were often seen as incompatible with familial responsibilities. A senior fundraiser in a focus group reported seeing differences in the ways men and women consider family circumstances when she is recruiting:

*“[Women] are making decisions based on more than just ‘what’s my next career step?’ They’re making decisions about: Where will the family be in this? And where*

*do we need to be living? And what are the kids doing? And what about my elderly parents? So they are bringing more factors into their thinking than perhaps some of their male colleagues who are just thinking 'What's my next career step?'*

A related stereotype was that women fundraisers belonged to traditional male-breadwinner households where their salary was deemed non-essential to supporting their family.

Therefore, women shared assumptions that they did not need to “earn as much” as male colleagues, could more easily cope with the financial impact of their hours being reduced, or viewed their job as a “hobby” or akin to a volunteer role.

Participants also experienced a double-standard in terms of leadership traits. Women felt they were expected to exhibit normative, so-called ‘feminine’ characteristics, such as being more empathetic and emotionally attuned to colleagues and donors, and reported experiencing a ‘likeability penalty’ when they exhibited characteristics that they believed would be praised in a man, such as being confident and direct. A woman in her 40s with a disability who works in a major charity described being “told that I am pushy and bossy rather than assertive and driven,” whilst another woman in her 30s working in a medium-sized charity described facing “jokes about ‘female’ behaviour traits, people assuming I would be overly-emotional [because that] is typical female hormonal behaviour.” Supporters also police women’s emotions, as exemplified when a major donor fundraiser under 30 reported a donor “telling me I should smile more because women should look happy.”

Finally, 60 women reported that they were expected to undertake tasks traditionally ascribed to women in the domestic sphere in the workplace, such as providing hot drinks and washing up after an event, acting as a secretary at meetings, and taking the lead on tasks such as organising presents for departing colleagues and “making the office homely.” A woman in her 30s who works at a major charity expressed frustration at “the general idea that the ‘girls’ from fundraising can be used as admin support across the organisation.” The influence of



third parties is also relevant here, as a focus group participant with over 25 years of experience working in a range of charities explained:

*“When the community fundraiser is male, [the supporters] all take him a cup of tea. And when the women come, who are community fundraisers, they expect them to help with the washing up.”*

Thus, supporters and wider community members reinforce the experience of stereotyping that occurs within the workplace through the way they treat professional fundraisers.

### Theme 2: Questioning and undermining of women’s professionalism

A second type of gender stereotyping experienced by participants involved their professional status being questioned and undermined, which manifested in three variations. First, women described patronising and belittling language, including the fundraising team being referred to internally as “the girls”, and board members and donors using terms such as “dear”, “love” and “darling” to refer to them. Secondly, many women reported frequent experiences of being spoken over, interrupted, “mansplained,” or ignored in meetings. A white woman in her 30s fundraising for a major charity described “Board members not engaging with me because I was doing the minutes. Donors not listening when I said something, but responding when a male colleague repeated my words.” Thirdly, a prevalent assumption was that women employees were always junior in relation to any men in the vicinity – or even outside of the room. Participants reported instances where colleagues, board members, and donors deferred to junior male colleagues; asked women if their boss would attend a meeting, event when they were the boss; or felt the need to bring a male colleague into a meeting to pre-empt the mistaken belief that the female fundraiser lacked seniority to make a decision. A major donor fundraiser in her 40s with 9 years of experience reported that:

*“In any meeting outside of my team but within my organisation, which involves me and a male colleague, my male colleague is almost always deferred to as the main protagonist, regardless of who has actually called the meeting (me) and who is leading the project (me).”*

Relatedly, participants reported stereotypes that male colleagues were not only senior, but were also better able to understand technical or scientific information. A CEO in her 40s with 25 years of experience described “donors and board members assuming a male colleague was more senior and would have a greater degree of technical knowledge and expertise”, whilst a fundraiser in charge of research insight for a major charity described “Being assumed to not have much technical knowledge on data analysis”.

The normative understanding of positional leadership and seniority being gendered male was a recurring theme in the focus groups. One participant explained how this played out to the detriment of her organisation:

*“I set up a meeting with a key potential (male) donor but was asked to not attend because the male trustee wanted to have a ‘man to man chat’. The prospect was surprised I was not at the meeting, the trustee did not make the expected ask of the prospect and the opportunity for a significant gift was lost.”*

This example illustrates that gender discrimination is not only harmful to the fundraisers who are directly affected, but is also detrimental to the organisations they work for, and to the wider nonprofit sector which is typically resource-deprived (Gregory and Howard 2009), and cannot afford to lose opportunities to secure funding and jeopardize donor relationships.

Whilst fundraising is a feminised profession, some types of fundraising have a greater proportion of male employees, including digital and corporate fundraising. This was a topic of discussion in another focus group in which a participant, who is CEO of her charity, shared this story:

*“I recruited a corporate fundraiser and [he] was a man, and he had much more success than the person who’d been doing the job previously who was a woman. [...] The organisations he was going to, the decision makers, were men. So he was getting more doors opened, he was bringing more people into the [charity], he was getting more partnerships, and he was doing a really good job. And funnily enough, he brought one of the corporates in and arranged for me to meet them, and when I actually met them they thought that he was the boss. They just assumed! And when they found out the CEO was a woman, that completely freaked them out!”*

When women do occupy corporate fundraising roles this gives rise to concerns that relationships between typically younger women fundraisers and typically older men representing corporate donors can reproduce exploitative gender power relations. As a focus group participant, reflecting on her earlier experiences in a corporate fundraising role which involved a lot of evening social occasions, explained:

*“It’s really interesting thinking about women coming into this [corporate fundraising] role because a lot of it is about sitting in rooms with very, very wealthy men and kind of being there to help them be entertained for the evening as they come to a concert or whatever. It’s a very strange dynamic I think for somebody, a young woman in her career.”*

The discomfort felt by women fundraisers who were asked to play what one described as a ‘geisha’ role was tangible in hindsight, yet rarely remarked upon when it first happened. These expectations also highlight the slippery slope where stereotypes make way for sexual harassment behaviour.

### Theme 3: Experiences of ‘everyday’ sexism and sexual harassment

The third theme is the widespread interactions that constitute objectification, sexualisation, and sexual harassment—more than 100 in total. While the majority of examples might constitute ‘everyday sexism,’ their pervasiveness is troubling. Participants reported hearing that it was their job to flirt with donors and “smile sweetly”, being expected to dress to impress (male) donors, and to use their sexuality for the benefit of the charity’s donated income stream.

Amongst the 43 survey examples of fundraisers being encouraged to flirt or use their sexuality as part of their professional repertoire, a female fundraiser in her 20s who worked for a major charity wrote:

*“I have had male senior managers say things like ‘maybe you should go to that meeting with that donor, you can give him a bit of the chat’, implying that as a young female I should flirt with donors or charm them in some way.”*

This type of directive does not only come from male bosses but from other women too, as a fundraiser in her 50s working for a large charity recalled, “Being told by a Fundraising Director (female) that ‘flirt-raising’ was just part of the fundraising game.”

Ironically, our participants also reported that equating fundraising with flirting was a tactic used to diminish professional success. A fundraiser in her 30s working for a large charity told us that “A manager once said that my higher-than-average fundraising results were due to my ability as a woman to ‘flirt’ with potential supporters.” Trustees also misogynistically misconstrue how fundraising works, for example asking a fundraiser in her 30s working for a large charity: “Do you flutter your eyelashes to bring all the cash in?”

Multiple women reported inappropriate comments on their dress and appearance, such as being told how to dress for events while male colleagues did not receive similar advice. A fundraiser in her 20s with responsibility for individual giving at a large charity described “Having my appearance being considered as ‘decorative value’ at events.” Similarly, a

corporate fundraiser in her 30s at a major charity was told “if I dressed more provocatively we’d raise more at a dinner.”

Participants shared more than 50 instances of direct harassment including donors’ lewd comments, sexual innuendos, being kissed on the cheek, touched on the neck, leg, or lower back, and propositioned for a date. A fundraising manager for a large charity, who was in her 30s, shared this litany of unpleasant experiences:

*“I’ve found the most difficulty when working with senior volunteers or board members as they tend to be older men who remember women being secretaries and not in the workplace. Problems arise when you work very closely with them, or at events that involve alcohol and are out of work hours. A trustee of a former charity tried to set me up with his son. One donor still calls me on my personal number to invite me to dinner. Another donor once asked me to go to bed with him when we were at an event... My female colleagues all had experiences like this.”*

Whilst the power imbalance with donors is especially acute and typically beyond organizational HR policies on harassment, women also reported male managers as being complicit in sexualising the fundraising function. A fundraiser in the position of head of events for a large charity in her 30s shared: “I have also been told that I would be the best person to attend a meeting because ‘he gets on well with the pretty ones.’” And a major donor fundraiser in a large charity with 30 years of experience said:

*“They think my job is all about – literally or figuratively - seducing donors. This manifested both as disrespect of my role (i.e. that it was frivolous and all about schmoozing rather than a profession, body of expertise and skill) and as a potential invitation for harassment.”*

As this last quote underlines, the three main themes identified in our data are interconnected: sexist comments and attitudes derive from normative gender expectations and

contribute to undermining women's professionalism, as well as being unacceptable and offensive. We turn now to discuss how gender relates to other types of discrimination faced by fundraisers in the workplace and conclude with a section about women's responses.

### Intersectional experiences: The role of age, race, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation in discrimination

While our study is focused on women fundraisers' experience of gender discrimination and harassment, there are multiple aspects of personal identity that influence people's experience in the workplace. Our data underlines the intersectionality of gender with other identity characteristics such as age, race, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation. Participants reported facing confusion and discrimination when they failed to conform to assumptions that charity professionals are male, middle-aged, and middle-class, as well as white, straight, and able-bodied.

Age was mentioned most often as a characteristic that resulted in stereotypical behaviour. Nineteen participants gave examples, usually concerning the combination of being youthful and female, which resulted in not being taken seriously and having their ability questioned by older donors, volunteers, and trustees. For example, a fundraiser with two decades of experience was nonetheless perceived in the light of her ascribed, rather than achieved, characteristics: "As a young female in a fundraising role, I was often treated as a 'pretty young thing' by certain donors." Gay, lesbian, and bisexual fundraisers faced prevailing heteronormative assumptions, along with assumptions that all women aspire to marriage and motherhood. Other respondents felt that being any ethnicity other than white British, or being from a working-class background, produced more significant stereotypes than being a woman. An Asian-British fundraising director in her 40s shared her

intersectional experience of facing discrimination that placed her on the periphery of the profession:

*“I’ve been patronised by male, privileged donors. I also look young and am quite short which means senior men often don’t take me seriously. Coupled with my race, I often feel not part of the club.”*

As the fundraising profession has a majority-female workforce, it is necessary to explore these issues with a gender lens. But we do not claim that gender is the only, or always the main, factor at play when fundraisers experience discrimination and harassment at work, where multiple sources of inherent bias are present (Biu 2019).

### **Women fundraisers’ inherent agency**

In pursuit of our goal to explore the fundraising profession with an explicitly feminist lens, we also found that the focus groups created opportunities for participants to articulate their concerns—sometimes for the first time—and start organising their response. Our study was therefore not only generative in the accepted epistemological sense of creating new knowledge as a result of the research encounter (Legard et al. 2003), but it also generated individual and collective awareness of the nature and extent of a problem and the desire to organise and respond. In addition to interactively and dynamically responding to questions, focus group participants simultaneously created a support group that enabled the sharing of frustrating and painful experiences, resulting in the swapping of contact details and promises to stay in touch and provide ongoing mutual support in the pursuit of career goals. As one participant stated as the focus group came to an end:

*“We need to do more talking like this, and we need to do a bit more peer support. Because even just having had a conversation in this room has made me feel a lot better, feel a lot more empowered.”*

## Discussion

The themes identified in our data support and expand on existing research on gender in the nonprofit sector (Damman et al. 2014; Sampson & Moore 2008), providing much-needed illustration of the lived reality facing women in the fundraising profession. The data also highlights the consequences of failing to tackle gender-based stereotyping and harassment, which – consistent with our feminist framework – enables us to offer potential steps toward a more equitable future.

The assumptions that fundraisers will embody ‘women’s roles’ and display ‘female’ characteristics are incompatible with a masculinised conception of leadership derived from a deep-rooted and gendered view of the division of labour. To this extent, nonprofit work reflects the traditional patriarchal family where men are the ‘head of the house’ while women are responsible for unpaid nurturing labour (Dale 2017; Odendahl 1996). The structural barriers described by our respondents in relation to balancing professional and personal commitments especially at leadership level, underline the conclusion reached by Holgerson and Hvenmark (2019) that,

“careers are often shaped according to traditional male lifestyles in which work is prioritised in relation to other obligations such as family, making it difficult for women who still have the main responsibility for childcare and domestic work, to combine work and family” (p. 95).

The daily work of fundraisers, which involves boundary-spanning between the organisations that pay their salaries and the donors who provide that funding, illustrates the gendered manifestation of resource dependency theory (Beaton et al. 2021). Despite relying on a female-dominated fundraising workforce to keep nonprofit organisations financially afloat, the relentless undermining of professional fundraisers, from everyday ‘micro-



aggressions' to more explicit sexual harassment, serves to undermine the credibility of the profession to both internal colleagues and external powerful third-party stakeholders. Without an end to stereotypical and discriminatory treatment of fundraisers, and in the absence of clear and sufficient opportunities for career progression, the risk is that fundraising will remain a 'pink ghetto' with all the attendant ingrained discrimination facing female-dominated professions as detailed in this paper (Dale 2017).

### **Implications for Knowledge and Practice**

One of the longstanding principles of feminist research is that it should contribute to emancipatory goals by producing research that will “alleviate the conditions of oppression” (Skeggs 2001, p. 429). Relatedly, feminist research also requires avoiding asymmetric relationships between the researcher and the researched, aiming for reciprocal rather than extractive relationships (Bryman 2016). Therefore, this paper ends by highlighting implications of our study to dismantle unequal and oppressive practices, and proposes three recommendations to address barriers that female fundraisers commonly face.

First, as women fundraisers faced harmful stereotypes from donors and board members, who are more powerful actors than their male colleagues, nonprofits should educate their trustees about stereotyping and preconceptions based on gender. Organizations need to enact policies to protect fundraisers from harassment by trustees and donors, strengthening the reach and impact of existing HR policies that only focus on internal instances of harassment by managers and colleagues.

Second, organisations should build on the experience of widespread home working during the COVID-19 pandemic to counter the idea that flexibility is incompatible with job performance and commitment. Designing permanently flexible working environments that suit employees most in need of flexibility, such as women with caring responsibilities, can

actually benefit any employee. Relatedly, when fundraising posts are advertised, recruiters should strive to provide clarity on the detail of flexible working arrangements, especially for leadership positions, to encourage more women to apply.

Finally, nonprofit sector support and infrastructure bodies should commission further research to better understand the workplace experiences and consequences of the widest range of characteristics: age, disability, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. Failure to document the unequal conditions faced by women and men who are aspiring or actual leaders in fundraising has a material consequence: it contributes to making inequalities invisible and therefore normal (Holgerson & Hvenmark 2019). Conversely, identifying and ending discrimination, and dismantling structural barriers facing fundraisers, will benefit the fundraising workforce and also the organisations for whom they work. As Dale (2017) notes, “the profession and perhaps even the entire sector, may be at risk if women continue to be held back” (p. 8).

## **Conclusion**

While the existence of gender discrimination in the nonprofit sector has been documented previously (see Gibelman 2000; Sampson & Moore 2008) the distinctive contribution of this paper has been to present qualitative data that provides insights into what such discrimination looks like in the context of the female-dominated profession of fundraising, and to analyse this data from a feminist perspective. By presenting qualitative data on the experiences and insights of hundreds of fundraisers, the novel contribution of this paper is to provide a picture of the lived reality of fundraising professionals that highlights the disparity between the higher-minded values animating their work and the reality of the more problematic conditions within which that work takes place.

Our feminist approach enables us to go beyond describing the conditions faced by women and men, to identify how gender—along with other dimensions of inequality such as age, race, class, physical ability, and sexual orientation—sustains male power structures and disadvantages women in the process of generating income for good causes. This outcome is clearly undermining of the progressive goals of most nonprofit organisations, and points to the need for action to ensure that internal processes and treatment of staff is mission-aligned.

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