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Gender discrimination in hiring: Lessons from a large-scale correspondence test

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Inequalities between women and men are a striking feature of the labor market: They are reflected in lower participation and lower wages for women, who also have less upwardly mobile career paths. The role of the conditions of entry into employment in contributing to these occupational inequalities is still poorly understood. To gain a better understanding of gender discrimination in hiring, a **large-scale experiment** was carried out by sending fictitious CVs in response to several thousand job offers in 11 different professions. These CVs differed only in the name of the applicant, to eliminate the effect of the quality of the applications on the chances of callback in the first phase of the recruitment process. Female and male applicants with a first name of French origin received the same overall response from employers: One third were called back, half did not receive a response, and the others were rejected. However, there were significant differences according to the level of qualification, with women being at a disadvantage in low-skilled occupations, while the opposite was true for managerial roles. The inclusion of information on family status (presence of children, marital status) or indicating a period of inactivity on the CVs did not result in any significant difference in treatment between female and male applications.

- Several thousand resumes were sent in response to job postings for 11 different occupations. We randomly varied the gender of applicants from one application to the next in order to measure gender discrimination in hiring.
- On average, women and men are contacted equally often by employers, so there is no detectable gender discrimination in the first phase of the recruitment process.
- The lack of discrimination on average is not related to the Covid-19 pandemic and was already observed before it.
- On the other hand, there are significant disparities linked to the level of qualification required, with women being disadvantaged in the least skilled jobs, but favored in more skilled professions, particularly when they involve management.
- This "reversal" in favor of women between low-skilled and skilled jobs is driven by occupations in which men make up the vast majority.
- The addition of information on CVs concerning the presence of children, marital status, or the existence of periods of inactivity does not, on average, discriminate against female applicants.

The Institute for Public Policy (IPP) was created by PSE and developed as a scientific partnership between PSE and the Groupe des Écoles Nationales d'Économie et de Statistique (GENES). The IPP aims to promote quantitative analysis and evaluation of public policies using cutting-edge methods in economic research.

GENES Groupe des écoles nationales d'économie et statistique

PARIS SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS
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Persistent gender inequalities in the labor market

Although they have been reduced in recent decades, inequalities between women and men in the labor market are both marked and persistent. Women are less active in the labor market (in 2020, the labor force participation rate for women aged 25 to 49 is 82.5%, compared to 91.9% for men), they are much more likely than men to hold part-time jobs, particularly involuntary ones[1] (this is the case for 27.4% of employed women in 2020, compared to 8.4% for men), and their wages are on average nearly 17% lower for the same volume of work (Insee, 2017).

These inequalities are the result of strong occupational segregation: this is both horizontal, with women and men distributed very unevenly across occupations (women are more strongly represented, in particular, in less skilled and less well-paid jobs); and vertical, with women experiencing less upwardly mobile career paths, due in particular to a glass-ceiling phenomenon (for example, they are underrepresented at the executive level, even though recent generations are more highly educated than men), and they are less likely to reach positions of responsibility than their male counterparts (Junel, 2019; Georges-Kot, 2020).

While the origins of these differences are multiple — economic, cultural, social — and largely well documented, the contribution of employment access conditions to this situation remains poorly understood. A few studies have been conducted in France to measure discrimination in hiring based on the gender of the applicant, but they only target specific ages, occupations, sectors and/or qualification levels, which does not provide an overall view of gender discrimination in hiring in France. Carried out by ISM Corum and the Institute for Public Policy under the aegis of Dares (the statistical service of the Ministry of Labour), this large-scale study aims to provide a more complete overview of gender inequalities in access to employment in the French labor market.

A large-scale correspondence test

To convincingly measure the existence of inequalities of treatment due to the gender of applicants, **it is necessary to eliminate the effect of the quality of applications** on their success in the job market. To do this, the method of correspondence testing that is used relies on two ingredients: (i) the content of the applications (the format of the CV, initial education, work experience, place of residence, etc.); and (ii) the identity of the applicants, which is chosen in such a way as to be perceived by employers as emanating from a particular population group — Claire and Sébastien, for example, in order to distinguish between applications based on their gender.

These two components are combined to create artificial applications sent in response to real job offers circulating in the labor market. The success of the applications is measured by callback rates, i.e. the proportion of applications in which employers show interest.[2]

To distinguish the specific effect of identity, the method is to create a large number of CVs with fixed contents that are sufficiently different from each other not to arouse the suspicions of employers. These differences may be associated with a different intrinsic quality of the application. To eliminate the effect of this, the association between identities (the candidates' first names) and CVs is systematically rotated from one job offer to another. For a given job offer, the male candidate may have a better quality CV than the female candidate. However, this association will be reversed in response to the next job opening, so any systematic difference in the average success of an identity can only be attributed to the effect of that identity on the treatment of that application by employers.

For practical reasons, most correspondence tests focus on a limited geographic location, a few occupations, and limited age groups. This study, on the other hand, addresses **a broad range of 11 occupational categories, covers the entirety of continental France, and includes three age groups** (see Box 1).

The occupations were chosen according to three criteria: the level of qualification they require, their degree of female participation, and the recruitment difficulties faced by recruiters in these occupations. The three age categories were chosen to correspond (on average) to key career stages, but also to parenthood (no children, young children, older children). This dimension is explicitly taken into account, as well as the family situation and the existence of periods of inactivity, by including in some applications additional information on the personal situation of the candidates. Finally, beyond applicants' gender, first names also convey perceptions about their social identity that are likely in themselves to contribute to the success of different identities (Gaddis, 2017). We use a large set of first names to neutralize such effects, some of French origin, the others of North African origin. However, to avoid mistakenly confusing differences linked to gender with those linked to perceived origin, the results presented in this study focus only on applications with a first name of French origin, referred to as "hexagonal" applications.[3]

[1] In 2015, 1.2 million women were involuntary part-time workers compared to 472,000 men, or three times less, according to the Observatoire des inégalités à partir de l'Insee, Données 2015.

[2] For each candidate, we keep track of all successive contacts from employers. Callback rates are calculated by taking into account the first informative response (which corresponds to a non-neutral, positive or negative contact) in the contact sequence.

[3] The results for applicants of North African origin and the differences

Box 1: Design of the applications

The occupations are chosen to measure gender gaps in different **segments of the labor market**, which are distinguished by:

- The degree of female participation in the occupation (low, mixed, predominantly female), which is identified from the wage composition observed in the DADS data ("postes" files, validity 2015) for each occupation;
- The level of qualification (low skilled, non-managerial executive, managerial), which is measured using the 2009 FAP (*familles professionnelles*) nomenclature;
- The level of recruitment tension (low or high), which is defined on the basis of the recruitment difficulties declared in the 2019 BMO (*Besoins en Main d'Œuvre*) survey.

The factorial combination of these criteria would lead to the definition of 12 categories of occupations, but certain combinations are not compatible with the constraint that the volume of recruitment be sufficient to allow the study to be carried out. The scope of the study is therefore limited to 11 job categories, the details of which are described in Figure 1. (For some occupational categories, the volume of recruitment proved insufficient to collect enough offers: We then added a second job with the same combination of characteristics as the job initially chosen.)

In addition to gender, applications are designed to measure the effect of various **individual characteristics**.

- The age range is defined by the number of years of professional experience, and chosen to vary the potential presence of young children. These criteria led us to select three age groups: 4 to 6 years of professional experience ("young", aged 23 to 30); 14 to 16 years of professional experience ("middle age", aged 33 to 40) and 29 to 31 years of professional experience ("senior", aged 48 to 55).
- Ethnic origin is another major source of discrimination in the labor market, and this is taken into account in the study by creating two identities for each gender: In addition to a job application perceived as "hexagonal", we also include a first name and a surname with a North African connotation. In total, the study therefore covers four different applications sent in response to each job offer. Discrimination based on ethnicity and gender are not necessarily additive (Crenshaw, 1991) and we analyze each dimension separately. The results presented in this policy brief therefore focus solely on hexagonal applications. The results for North African applications and the differences according to origin will be presented in separate reports.
- Family situation is indicated by a set of personal information appearing on the CV. The family situation of our candidates varies the marital status (couple/single) as well as the presence (or not) of two children in the household. In addition, in the "Professional experience" section of the CV, a two-year period of inactivity is added, which may precede the most recent professional experience.
- The socio-demographic situation potentially perceived due to the candidate's first name is controlled by extracting information from the "Trajectories and Origins" survey[a] which compares social origin (advantaged/disadvantaged, measured by the father's socio-professional classification) and age (in three classes: 25, 35, and 50 years). For each of the four groups produced by the gender-ethnicity intersection, we retain a first name representative of each of the six corresponding categories.

To preserve the statistical power of the tests, we respond to each job offer with a fixed age range. To ensure that the age indicated on the applications is consistent with the occupation, two age groups are tested for each occupation: The applicants are either young or of intermediate age for low-skilled occupations and non-managerial executive occupations, and are either of intermediate or senior age for managerial occupations. The effect of family situation is measured by creating three sets of signals: the first combines a period of inactivity with the presence of children; the second combines marital status with the presence of children; while the third is a control set, with no additional signals. Each set consists of four signals, each of which is assigned to an application when the set is relevant to the offer.

[a] The "Trajectoires et Origines" survey is an INED and INSEE survey that seeks to study the influence of origins on living conditions and social trajectories in relation to other socio-demographic characteristics.

To allow statistically convincing conclusions to be drawn from the responses collected, the study focuses on applications sent in response to 240 job offers for each of the 11 job categories included in the scope of the study (Box 2 specifies the conditions under which these applications were sent).

No discrimination in hiring on average between women and men …

Of the 4,800 applications sent out (2,400 women and 2,400 men), one-third received a response expressing interest from the recruiter, and this callback rate did not differ between female and male applicants (Table 1). Similarly, the refusal rate (around 17%) and the rate of non-response (1 out of 2) do not differ significantly according to the gender suggested by the first name of the can-

according to origin will be presented in later work.

Box 2: Implementation of the correspondence test

To construct the applications, CVs and cover letters were written by people with in-depth knowledge of each of the occupations tested, so as to propose four applications for each job offer that were equivalent in content and likely to interest the recruiters, without arousing their suspicions. Two quartets of applications were drafted for each occupation — a total of 24 quartets — according to the age groups to be tested.

Computer scripts made it possible to list the job offers published each day on the Indeed, Pôle emploi, and APEC websites for the 11 job categories targeted, taking care to exclude those whose recruitment was managed by employment intermediaries, and to retain only those offers that allowed the employers to be tested directly. This rule does not prevent recruitment agencies and temporary employment agencies from being tested as employers, especially since the job of recruitment coordinator is one of those targeted by the study. These offers were then examined in the order in which they were published to ensure that they could be tested (at this stage, offers were discarded if they required skills that were not present in the test applications, if they suggested application by telephone or by direct presentation, or if they concerned an employer who had already been tested previously or who appeared in one of the CVs to be sent).

The offers that were not rejected for one of these reasons were all tested, regardless of the location of the job. The study is therefore homogeneous at the territorial level, with tests carried out in all departments (except for the French overseas territories) and in more than 1,000 different municipalities. The employers tested are also very diverse in terms of size, sector of activity, and the way in which their recruitment is organized (more or less centralized).

The applications were finalized using a geolocation tool that randomly assigned addresses within a fixed perimeter around the job location. The order in which applications were sent was systematically rotated. The applications were sent by email or by filling in an application form, according to the method indicated in the offer, and were sent within 24 hours for junior positions and 48 hours for executive positions. The two high-demand jobs (junior cook and developer) are an exception to this rule: The sending periods were extended to 48 and 72 hours respectively, in order to limit the risks of detection that sending applications too close together would pose for the study.

In total, 2,400 job offers were tested by sending 9,600 applications. Recruiters' responses were collected using several dozen different cell phone lines and email addresses, and each test was fully traceable (dates and times applications were sent, dates and times responses were received, mode of response, gender and role of respondents). More than 8,000 responses were received, ranging from simple acknowledgements of receipt to interview proposals. When employers could be reached by email, their offers were declined so as not to interfere with the recruitment process — using the excuse of another job, a change in employment status, or a family problem.

The study took place during a peculiar period, since it started before the health crisis, in December 2019. It was interrupted at the time of the first lockdown, between March and June 2020, and ended in April 2021, in a context still marked by the crisis and its considerable impact on the labor market. Nevertheless, the results in terms of gender gaps remain stable over the entire period, despite an overall decrease in the callback rate, as shown in the table below. For this reason, we do not distinguish between the different periods of analysis in the rest of this policy brief.

Sending period	December 2019 — March 2020 ($N = 738$)			July 2020 — April 2021 ($N = 1662$)		
	Callback	Refusal	Non-responses	Callback	Refusal	Non-responses
Female	40,1 %	6,2 %	53,7 %	30,4 %	22,6 %	47,0 %
Male	37,7 %	7,5 %	54,9 %	31,2 %	20,6 %	48,1 %

Sample: 4,800 hexagonal applications (2,400 tests × 2 applications (female and male)).
Note: The callback rate corresponds to a clear interest from the recruiter; refusal corresponds to a negative response received for the application; non-response means that the application was not answered by the recruiter.
Interpretation: Between December 2019 and March 2020, among all applications, recruiters showed interest in 40.1% of female applications.
Source: Dares/IPP/ISM Corum testing.

didates. **Thus, for all the applications sent, there is no significant inequality of treatment between female and male applications.**

Without being representative of the entire labor market, this test makes it possible to study whether the overall absence of inequality of treatment persists when a large number of occupations with different characteristics are studied (see below). In fact, the absence of an overall difference in callback rates masks **strong heterogeneity between occupations** (Figure 1). First of all, for all applications, the callback rates vary greatly depending on the occupation: Managerial occupations have the lowest callback rates; while the occupations with the highest demand, as well as cable installers and order pickers, have the highest callback rates. Furthermore, within each occupation, the callback rates for male and female applicants differ, sometimes with very significant differences. This confirms the value of a multi-dimensional approach, which makes it possible to study the gender gaps in hiring according to the characteristics of the occupations (level

Table 1: Average response rates

	Callback	Refusal	Non-responses
Female	33,4 %	17,5 %	49,0 %
Male	33,2 %	16,6 %	50,2 %
Difference	+0,6 %	+5,4 %	-2,4 %

Sample: 4,800 hexagonal applications (2,400 tests × 2 applications (female and male)).
Note: The callback rate corresponds to a clear interest on the part of the recruiter; refusal indicates a negative response received for the application; non-response means that the application was not answered by the recruiter. The significance levels are respectively equal to 1% (***), 5% (**) and 10% (*).
Interpretation: Among all applications, recruiters showed interest in 33.4% of female applications; the callback rate is thus 0.6% higher than for male applications, but this difference is not statistically significant.
Source : Dares/IPP/ISM Corum testing.

of job-market tension, degree of feminization, level of qualification) but also according to the socio-demographic characteristics of the male and female applicants (age in particular).

… but significant differences according to the qualification level of occupations …

Table 2 provides the callback rates for women and men according to the degree of feminization of the various occupations, the level of qualification they require, the possible difficulties in recruiting for them, or the age and supposed social origin of the applicants.

First of all, it appears that women are not more discriminated against for hiring in occupations where the proportion of men is high and where gender stereotypes could have worked against them. More generally, the differences in callback rates between women and men do not vary much with the level of feminization of occupations. Similarly, we do not detect any clear effect of recruitment difficulties within an occupation (job-market "tension"), or of the social origin that could be suggested by the candidate's first name, on the differences in callback rates between women and men: The differences in callback rates observed are never statistically significantly different from 0.

However, differences appear according to the skill level of the occupations and the age of the applicants: Women are favored over men in the most skilled occupations, especially those with management roles, while the opposite occurs in the less skilled occupations. The same type of relationship is observed for age: Among the oldest candidates (48 to 55 years old), women are favored, while among the youngest (23 to 30 years old), men are favored. These preferences of recruiters for one gender over the other because of the age or qualification level of the candidates are likely to be related. In fact, the experimental protocol of the study is such that the older candidates mostly applied for the most highly skilled jobs.

To examine the effect of age, skill level, and the other characteristics studied, we reproduce in the last column of the table the differences in callback rates in each group, after controlling for the share of these differences that can be explained by the other characteristics. These results, obtained by means of standard statistical techniques, show that, once the joint effect of the different variables is taken into account, **only the differences in callback between women and men linked to the skill level of the occupation remain substantial and statistically significant**.

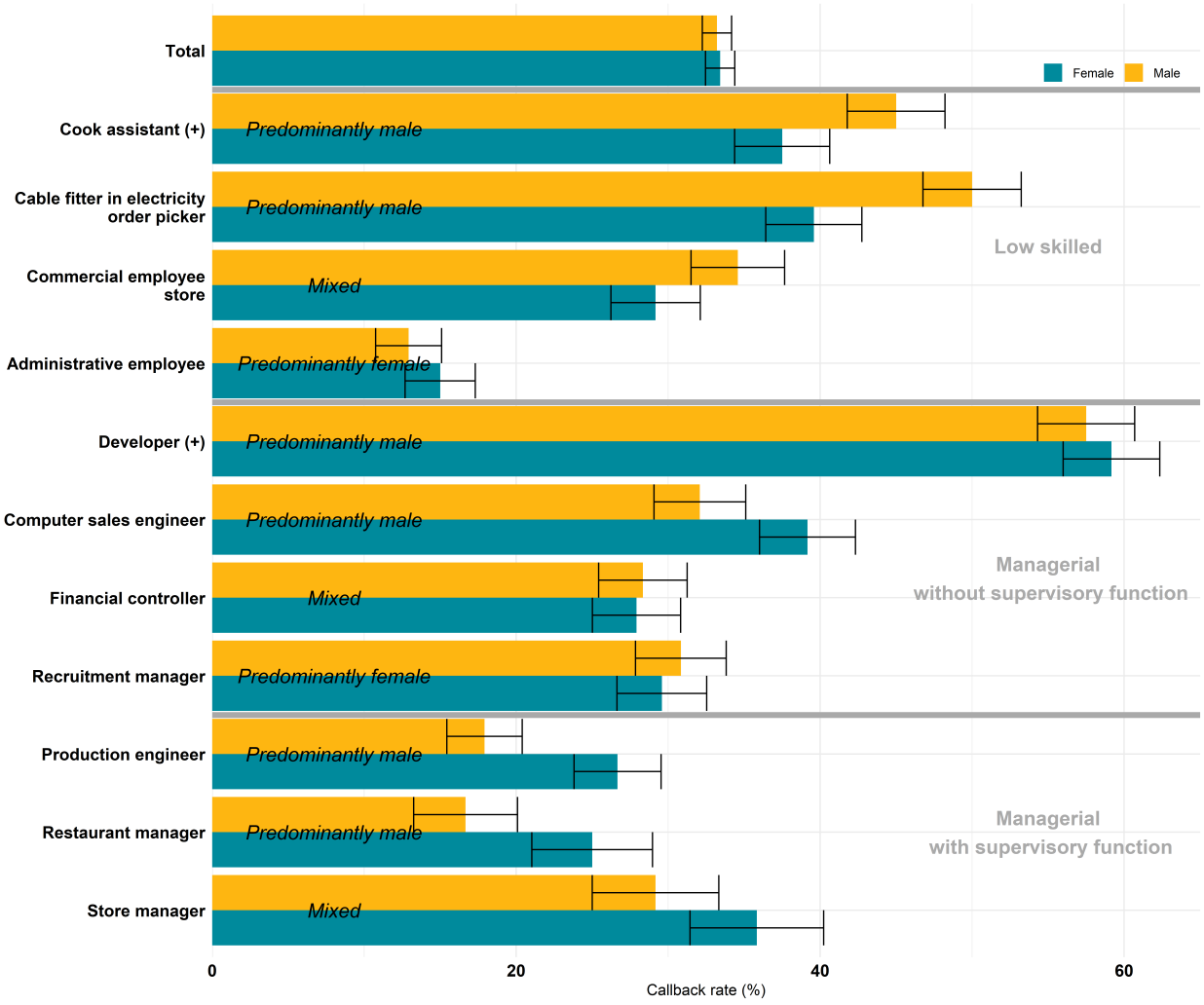
While women are not discriminated against on average, they appear to be favored when they are qualified and applying for managerial jobs, and disadvantaged when they are poorly qualified and applying for low-skilled jobs. It is even possible to go further by noting that this contrast between skilled and low-skilled occupations is largely driven by the most male-dominated occupations: Among these occupations, discrimination in hiring on the basis of gender literally reverses itself as the required level of qualification increases (Figure 1).

Table 2: Callback rates by employers according to occupation and candidate characteristics

	N	Callback rate (%) H	F	Differences (F/M, %) Gross	Net
Degree of female participation					
Predominantly male	2640	38,3	39,0	+1,8	+0,5
Mixed	1200	31,0	30,0	-3,2	-4,1
Predominantly female	960	21,9	22,3	+1,8	+8,2
Level of qualification of occupation					
Low qualifications	1920	35,6	30,3	-14,9**	-15,1***
Skilled qualifications	1920	37,2	39,0	+4,8	+4,1
– with management tasks	960	20,4	28,5	+39,7***	+41,7***
Recruitment difficulties faced by recruiters					
Élevée	960	51,2	48,3	-5,7	-2,1
Faible	3840	28,7	29,7	+3,5	+1,7
Age brackets					
23 to 30 y.o.	1920	40,5	37,5	-7,4	-2,6
33 to 40 y.o.	2400	31,8	33,4	+5,0	+5,0
48 to 55 y.o.	480	10,8	17,1	+58,3**	-20,6
Social origin as suggested by first name					
Unfavored	2413	33,7	34,3	+1,8	+3,3
Favored	2387	32,7	32,5	-0,6	-2,4
Fixed effects and controls				No	Yes

Sample: 4,800 hexagonal applications (2,400 tests × 2 applications (female and male)).
Note : The gross relative gap is the difference between the callback rates of women and men, divided by the callback rate of men. The net difference corresponds to this same ratio, once we have neutralized the differences explained by the other characteristics considered in the table or by the characteristics of the job offers tested. The significance levels are respectively equal to 1% (***), 5% (**) and 10% (*).
Interpretation : In response to offers for low-skilled occupations, the callback rate is 35.6% for the 960 male applications and 30.3% for the 960 female applications, i.e., a gross relative deviation of $(30.3 - 35.6)/35.6 = -14.9\%$, which is statistically different from 0 at the 95% confidence level. This relative difference rises to -15.1% once the effect of all the characteristics of the application is taken into account, and is statistically different from 0 at the 99% confidence level.
Source : Dares/IPP/ISM Corum testing.

Figure 1: Average callback rates according to occupation



Sample: 4,800 hexagonal applications (2,400 tests × 2 applications (female and male)).
Note : For all applications (first two rows) and for each job category (following rows), the graph presents the callback rates obtained by female and male applicants as well as their 95% confidence intervals. The occupations are classified according to their skill level and degree of feminization. Occupations for which there is a recruitment shortage are indicated by a (+).
Interpretation: The occupation of administrative clerk is feminized, low-skilled, and there is low demand for applicants. The success of male applications to advertisements associated with this occupation is slightly lower than that of female applications and the difference is not significant.
Source : Dares/IPP/ISM Corum testing.

… but information on parenthood or periods of inactivity has little impact

Surprisingly (considering, for example, the results of Petit, 2007), **the addition of marital status or even periods of inactivity on the CVs has on average little effect on the chances of being contacted by a potential recruiter**. Indeed, the callback rates of applicants are roughly equivalent regardless of the signal introduced, ranging from 29.7% for those not in the labor force, in a couple with two children, to 35.6% for those who are single with two children (Table 3, column 1). These callback rates are all fairly close to the 32.7% rate obtained for applications that do not include any extra signal. In addition, the small differences in callback rates observed are not statistically significant.

More detailed analyses, however, neutralizing the specific effect of the characteristics of each job offer and of the factors studied in Table 2 show that the addition of signals on the CV can have a different effect depending on the age of the candidates. **For the youngest, indicating a period of inactivity or the presence of children systematically reduces the chances of being contacted by a recruiter**. For the middle-aged, the addition of information on CVs, regardless of its nature, also reduces the chances of being called back. The opposite is true at older ages, for whom the presence of certain signals on the CV may seem more natural, in particular because of changes in practices in this area over time (the younger generations have become more accustomed to not putting strictly personal information on their CVs). Overall, the results suggest that **the presence of signals on CVs does not induce a substantial reaction from employers**.

Do signals about personal circumstances, if they have little effect in general, have a differential effect on the callback chances of women and men? On average, the addition of signals on CVs slightly disadvantages women, but the observed difference remains small and is not statistically significant. The introduction of information that one might have thought would be highly unfavorable to women (e.g., being single with children) does not reduce their chances of being called back. More refined analyses that neutralize the possible effect of the variables studied in Table 2 and examine the effect of signals for women and men of different ages confirm these findings: The addition of information on marital status or inactivity has little effect on the chances of recruitment for either women or men. **Signals tend to hinder applications at younger ages and favor them at older ages, but this is not the case for women more than for men.**

Table 3: Variation of the gender gap according to the socio-demographic indicators included in the applications

	Callback rate (%)			Differences (F/M, %)	
	Mean	M	F	Gross	Net
No signal	34,2	33,2	35,2	+6,0	+4,5
Signal	32,7	33,2	32,2	-3,0	-6,8
Incl. :					
_____single	33,7	33,5	33,8	+0,9	-5,8
_____single, 2 children	35,6	33,8	37,3	+10,4	-9,7
_____in a couple	34,3	35,0	33,5	-4,3	-9,5
_____in a couple, 2 children	33,0	33,8	32,1	-5,0	+1,6
_____inactive	29,8	28,4	31,1	+9,5	-16,7
inactive, in a couple, 2 children	29,7	34,0	25,4	-25,3**	-12,3
Fixed effects and controls				No	Yes

Sample: 4,800 hexagonal applications (2,400 tests × 2 applications (female and male)).
Note : The gross relative gap is the difference between female and male callback rates divided by the male callback rate. The net difference corresponds to this same ratio, once the differences explained by the characteristics presented in Table 2 or by the characteristics of the offers to which the applications are sent, are neutralized. The significance levels are respectively equal to 1% (***), 5% (**) and 10% (*).
Interpretation: When the identity section of the CV explicitly mentions being single, the average recall rate is 33.7%, 33.5% for male applications and 33.8% for female applications, i.e. a relative gross difference of +0.9% which is not statistically different from 0. The relative net difference is -5.8% but is not significantly different from 0.
Source : Dares/IPP/ISM Corum testing.

Conclusion

This study, conducted on a wide range of occupations, suggests that, on average, women are not called back for a job interview any less than their male counterparts. This lack of discrimination on average, however, conceals significant disparities related to the level of qualification required, with women being disadvantaged in the least skilled occupations, but favored in more skilled occupations, particularly when they involve managerial roles. Interestingly, this "reversal" in favor of women between low-skilled and skilled jobs is driven by occupations in which men are in the vast majority.

Further analysis is needed to better understand this phenomenon; for example, by examining in more detail the way in which feminization within each company influences its recruitment. However, by showing that certain occupations with very few women recruiting for management positions favor female applicants, the results obtained already show that recruiters' decisions do not systematically conform to gender stereotypes regarding their recruitment practices, and that discrimination is not always observed where it might have been anticipated.

Another potentially surprising finding of the study is that indications on the CV about parenthood or the existence of periods of inactivity do not seem to have an effect on the chances of callback for either women or men. Again, employers do not seem to screen out candidates because of their personal circumstances. This finding should be qualified, however, by the limitations of the testing method used in this study. Indeed, this method only measures the chances of being contacted by an employer or invited to a job interview. It is possible that employers then use the job interview to determine the individual situation and motivation of the candidates and their ability to invest themselves in their work. It is therefore possible that, at the interview stage, parental status or the likelihood (real or assumed) of having children in the near future may affect the chances of recruitment, to the detriment of female candidates.

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See also

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