



Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment

By Barbara F. Reskin



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A book that brings social science knowledge to bear on issues of affirmative action is long overdue. Just a cursory reading of any newspaper or listening to radio or television commentary makes clear that this is a public policy topic more frequently charged with "heat" than "light." The Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment seeks to diffuse the rhetoric by adding the perspective of systematic empirical study.

As the title implies, The Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment is a project grounded in what we know about affirmative action. The book is about how affirmative action works and what impact it has had on employees, employers, and the public. Early on in the book, we learn that affirmative action is formally mandated for only a small proportion of employers and firms. The book, however, goes beyond where affirmative action may be technically required and considers more generally the impact of affirmative action in setting norms and standards of practice throughout the workplace.

In keeping with the goals of this project, The Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment was produced with an assiduous dedication to empirical research. The project sought to take the commonplace assumptions of proponents and opponents of affirmative action and ferret out myth from reality based strictly on scientific data and research. Also, it is comprehensive in its scope: The book takes into consideration the experiences and perspectives of employees who are the targets of affirmative action, other employees, all employers, and the public. It also examines the costs and benefits to organizations and firms.

As discussions and debate continue about how best to reap the benefits of a diverse workforce, The Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment is worth reading and rereading.

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Realities of Affirmative Action in Employment By Barbara F. Reskin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2675166 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Amer Sociological Assn
- Published on: 1998-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 6.25" w x .25" l,
- Binding: Paperback

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Barbara F. Reskin completed her Ph.D. at the University of Washington in 1973. She is Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. Most of Reskin's research and teaching focus on sex, race, and ethnic inequality in employment. She has published several dozen articles and chapters on these topics along with five books, including *Women and Men at Work* (with Irene Padavic, 1994); *Job Queues, Gender Queues: Explaining Women's Inroads into Male Occupations* (with Patricia Roos, 1990), *Women's Work, Men's Work: Sex Segregation on the Job* (with Heidi Hartmann, 1986); *Sex Segregation in the Workplace: Trends, Explanations, Remedies* (1984), and *Sex Differences in the Professional Life Chances of Chemists* (1980). Reskin has served as Vice President of the American Sociological Association, chaired Committee W of the American Association of University Professors, was study director for the National Research Council's committee on Women's Employment, chaired the Organizations, Occupations, and Work Section of the American Sociological Association, and served as an expert witness in discrimination suits. She has been a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Sociological Association Section on Sex and Gender, and was a Lecturer in the Sociologists for Women in Society's series on Women and Social Change.

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Affirmative action in employment is among the most politicized social reforms of the second half of the twentieth century. The very term conjures up contradictory images: equal opportunity, reverse discrimination; unfair competition, a level playing field; diversity, quotas. While public policies of any scope and significance have avid supporters and opponents, affirmative action appears to have been beset by more than its fair share of controversy.

One reason for the controversy is that there is little attention to the reasons why affirmative action exists. Affirmative action came into being because sex and race discrimination are everyday occurrences in America's places of work. Regardless of whether discrimination results from employers' and managers' stereotypes and biases or from their doing business as usual, it exacts a high price on minorities, women, the employers who practice it, and American society. It is this everyday discrimination that affirmative action policies and practices are designed to prevent.

Another reason for this controversy is that few Americans understand what affirmative action in employment actually entails, which employers are obligated to practice it, and what its effects have been. One-third of the white respondents to a recent *New York Times*/CBS poll admitted that they were not sure what affirmative action meant (Steeh and Krysan 1996, p. 129). It is likely that many of the other two-thirds who thought they knew have it wrong.

Part of the confusion over the realities of affirmative action stems from the fact that its particulars depend on the context. What is true about formally mandated affirmative action in education or in government procurement programs often does not apply to affirmative action in employment, the focus of this volume. Even with respect to employment, the specifics entailed in mandatory affirmative action depend on the source of the mandate. A series of presidential orders requires some forms of affirmative action by Federal contractors and Federal agencies. Federal law authorizes courts to order certain types of affirmative actions for employers who have been found guilty of employment discrimination. In addition, the Supreme Court permits employers to pursue certain voluntary affirmative action efforts. Thus, affirmative action is not a single policy but a set of processes and practices that have evolved over three decades and share the goal of

actively preventing discrimination.

Exacerbating the confusion is the fact that affirmative action has become a political football. People whose primary objective is to use affirmative action as a rallying cry-to arouse indignation, get voters to the polls, or sell books-have no incentive to accurately describe this complex beast. The politicization, misconstruction, and sheer complexities of affirmative action breed confusion and- since what is at stake are jobs, promotions, and earnings-resentment.

Misunderstanding and resentment make for interesting politics, but they do not foster rational public discourse. The object of examining the realities of affirmative action is to provide a foundation for informed public discussion and decisionmaking. This volume has drawn on a large number of scholarly studies to synthesize what social science has learned about affirmative action in the employment context and the implications of this knowledge for sound social policy.

This book began with a working group of social scientists convened by the American Sociological Association in June 1996. Group members brought expertise in organizations' behavior; the workings of labor markets; human resource and employment policies; race, gender, and ethnic inequality; employment discrimination; politics; social policy; and public opinion. Although working group members approached affirmative action quite differently in their own scholarship, the research record convinced workshop participants on the following points: First, on-going employment discrimination against minorities and women necessitates concerted efforts to check discrimination. Second, affirmative action is effective in reducing discrimination against historically excluded groups. Third, by encouraging the formalization of personnel practices, affirmative action has helped replace cronyism with more objective procedures and policies that benefit most workers. Fourth, affirmative action as practiced in the United States today is much closer to Americans' values than the rhetoric would have us believe.

Based on a review of social science evidence, working group members noted both the specific and generalized impact of affirmative action in reducing employment discrimination. Its symbolic effects on the workplace cannot be minimized. Nevertheless, participants also concluded that for affirmative action to realize its potential to eliminate discriminatory barriers, it must be mandated for a wider range of employers, and more resources must be devoted to its implementation. The alternative-weakening affirmative action-would be a costly and dangerous experiment that the United States cannot afford. Of course, affirmative action is not a silver bullet that can end employment discrimination. It must be combined with other policies and programs such as increased educational opportunity and economic development.

This report draws on the expertise of working group members and on the breadth of social science literature on discrimination and affirmative action. The first chapter of this report defines affirmative action as actions, policies, and procedures designed to combat discrimination in the workplace and hence to equalize employment opportunity. The details of these actions, policies, and procedures depend partly on whether affirmative action is officially mandated by the federal government's contract-compliance program or a court decree, or whether it is a voluntary program. Chapter 2 describes the discriminatory practices that affirmative action was designed to overcome and the consequences of these practices. Chapter 3 presents research on the effects of affirmative action policies on minorities' and women's job opportunities. It shows that, when employers act in good faith, affirmative action has reduced discriminatory barriers to jobs. Chapter 4 examines what affirmative action practices are most effective. These include firm leadership; goals, timetables, and monitoring; and formalized personnel practices. Chapter 5 addresses the impact of affirmative action on members of groups not targeted for protection and on American commerce, and it summarizes public reactions to affirmative action. Chapter 6 brings the findings together and discusses their implications for U.S. equal employment policy.

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