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From Injustice to Solidarity: Linking Gender-Based Discrimination Experiences to Cross-Issue Political Engagement

Lisa Walter ^{a,b}

^aInstitute of Political Science, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, Germany; ^bInstitute of Pedagogy, University of Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany

ABSTRACT

While prior research links discrimination experiences to higher levels of political engagement among women, it remains unclear whether such engagement extends beyond in-group advocacy and how the nature of discriminatory experiences relates to this association. Drawing on survey data from Germany ($N \approx 1,800$), this study examines how gender-based discrimination is associated with political engagement across four issue areas: women's rights, anti-racism, labor rights, and environmentalism. The analysis identifies consistent positive relations between reported discrimination experiences and engagement across all domains, indicating that perceptions of gender injustice may be connected to broader forms of feminist consciousness and egalitarian orientations. Additional analyses show that this pattern holds primarily among women identifying on the political center or left, but not among those on the right. The results also point to issue-specific differences between overt and subtle forms of discrimination and underscore the particular salience of societal or everyday sexism for understanding patterns of political engagement.

KEYWORDS

Gender-based discrimination; political engagement; feminism; activism; Germany

Introduction

Gender-based discrimination remains a persistent feature of women's lived experiences across social, professional, and private spheres. While its harmful consequences are well documented, such experiences have also been associated with higher levels of political engagement. Prior research shows that women who encounter gender-based discrimination are more likely to challenge inequality and participate politically (e.g., Bankert 2020; Hansen and Dolan 2020; Harnois 2015). This relationship is often explained by a growing recognition of gendered experiences as collectively shared and an associated feminist consciousness (Hooks 1986; Corsten, Daviddi, and Doering 2025; Gurin, Miller, and Gurin 1980; Harnois 2015; Smith 1987).

In much of the existing empirical literature, the relationship between gender-based discrimination and political engagement is conceptualized as primarily issue- and group-specific: women who experience such discrimination are assumed to channel their engagement into feminist or gender-focused activism aimed at improving the situation of women as a group. However, prior studies (e.g., Bankert 2020; Hansen and Dolan 2020) tend to rely on relatively general measures of political engagement that do not differentiate between the specific issue domains toward which this engagement is directed. Building on an integrated theoretical framework that draws from relative deprivation theory (RDT), feminist theory, and group empathy theory, I argue that experiences of gender-based discrimination may not only be linked to gender-specific activism

CONTACT Lisa Walter  lisa.walter@uni-bamberg.de  Institute of Political Science, University of Bamberg, Kapuzinerstraße 16, 96047 Bamberg, Germany

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but also to broader, cross-issue engagement. Central to this argument are insights from feminist scholarship emphasizing that feminist consciousness can transcend in-group boundaries, promoting cross-group solidarity and participation in wider struggles for social justice (e.g., hooks 1984; Harnois 2015). This idea is further reinforced by group empathy theory, which suggests that individuals who have personally encountered discrimination are more likely to empathize with – and act in support of – other marginalized groups (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017).

While most research on the relationship between gender-based discrimination and political engagement is based on the US context, this study extends these insights to a different institutional and sociocultural setting. Germany represents a comparable yet distinct case that allows for testing whether mechanisms identified in US-based research hold in a European welfare-state context. It combines high levels of formal gender equality and a strong state commitment to anti-discrimination policies with persistent structural and everyday inequalities (e.g., Ahrens, Ayoub, and Lang 2021; Von Dem Knesebeck et al. 2025). Moreover, Germany's active gender policy landscape, its diverse post-migrant population (Foroutan 2019), and vibrant public debates around #MeToo and equal pay (Martini 2020; Wallaschek et al. 2022) make it a particularly dynamic context for examining how experiences of sexism are linked to solidaristic, cross-issue engagement. Situating the analysis in Germany thus offers a theoretically informed test of whether the associations between perceived injustice and political engagement also hold in a European setting.

This article focuses on individuals who identify as female.¹ While (cis) men may also report gender-based bias, such experiences tend to be more individualized and less embedded in broader systems of inequality, making them less likely to translate into politicized group identification or collective engagement. For women, by contrast, discrimination experiences often resonate with broader narratives of collective struggle, making feminist identification more politically meaningful (Jetten et al. 2013; Levanon and Grusky 2016; Manzi 2019; Vandello et al. 2013).

This study makes three key contributions.

First, it examines whether and how gender-based discrimination experiences are associated with political engagement across four issue areas – women's rights, anti-racism, labor and social rights, and environmentalism. The analysis identifies a consistent positive association between gender-based discrimination experiences and engagement across all domains, suggesting that such experiences are linked to broader forms of activism that extend beyond gender-specific causes.

Second, the study differentiates between distinct forms and sources of discrimination. While prior research often treats discrimination as a uniform construct, theoretical work emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between overt and subtle forms (El-Mafaalani et al. 2017; Hansen 2009; Jones et al. 2016; Kawakami, Francine, and Elysia 2019), as well as between institutional or political and societal or everyday contexts (Oskooi 2016, 2020). Building on these distinctions, the analysis suggests issue-specific patterns: overt discrimination appears to be particularly salient for engagement in causes addressing groups exposed to physical or symbolic violence – such as women's rights and anti-racism – whereas subtle discrimination is more strongly associated with engagement in broader, non-identity-based causes, such as environmental or social rights activism. Regarding the source of discrimination, the results suggest that societal or everyday experiences are particularly salient across issue areas, while institutional discrimination shows only limited empirical relevance.

Third, the study examines how cumulative experiences of discrimination may relate to women's political engagement. Acknowledging that women are not a homogeneous group and are exposed to discrimination in different ways and intensities, the analysis distinguishes between respondents who reported only gender-based discrimination and those who also experienced additional forms of bias, such as racism, classism, ageism, or ableism. The results show that both groups display higher levels of political engagement than women who reported no discrimination, with slightly higher – though statistically insignificant – levels among those who experienced multiple forms of discrimination. Overall, these findings suggest that cumulative experiences of disadvantage coincide with, but do not significantly amplify, women's political engagement across issue domains.

Theoretical framework

Gender-based discrimination experiences and political engagement

To this day, women all over the world are affected by gender-based discrimination² and misogyny. Such experiences range from unequal opportunities in education and work (Corsten, Daviddi, and Doering 2025; Jetten et al. 2013; Levanon and Grusky 2016; Manzi 2019; Vandello et al. 2013) to harassment, stalking, (domestic) violence, and, in the most extreme cases, femicide (European Commission 2024). Drawing on feminist theory, this study understands gender-based discrimination not merely as individual grievance but as a structural condition that shapes lived experiences and political subjectivities (hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1991; Hill Collins 2000).

While the damaging effects of discrimination are well documented,³ a growing body of political science research shows that gendered experiences are associated with higher levels of political engagement (e.g., Bankert 2020; Hansen and Dolan 2020). Notably, Bankert (2020) provides experimental evidence that experiences of sexism can increase women's political engagement (particularly among liberals), thereby highlighting the motivational potential of perceived injustice. However, most existing studies rely on broad measures of political engagement and rarely differentiate between distinct issue domains. Within this line of research, discrimination is typically assumed to foster primarily in-group mobilization, motivating women to challenge the structures that disadvantage their own group (Bankert 2020; Duncan 1999; Friedman and McAdam 1992). Consequently, we still know little about whether the observed link between experiences of sexism and political participation is confined to gender-specific activism, or whether it also extends to other political causes.

This study integrates three strands of scholarship – relative deprivation theory (RDT), feminist theory, and group empathy theory – to explain how experiences of gender-based discrimination may be associated with cross-issue feminist solidarity rather than only in-group activism.

According to RDT, perceptions of injustice can mobilize political action, particularly when they are linked to group identification and collective efficacy (Crosby and Gonzalez-Intal 1984; Gurr 2011; Postmes et al. 1999; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Smith and Ortiz 2002; Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008; Walker and Pettigrew 1984). Strong emotions, especially anger, are seen as central to this process, helping to transform dissatisfaction into change-oriented behavior (Campbell 2003; Groenendyk and Banks 2014; Marcus, Russell Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Miller and Krosnick 2004; Platt 2008; Rozin et al. 1999; Van Zomeren et al. 2004). While RDT provides a framework for understanding how perceived injustice is associated with collective action within groups, it offers limited insight into cross-group engagement. In particular, it does not systematically address whether and how experiences of injustice relate to political engagement on behalf of other disadvantaged groups or issue domains.

Feminist theory provides an important extension to this perspective. Feminist scholarship posits that discrimination experiences can contribute to the development of feminist consciousness – a politicized awareness that personal grievances reflect broader systems of structural oppression (Hooks 1986; Corsten, Daviddi, and Doering 2025; Smith 1987). Once such experiences are recognized as structural, they may encourage forms of solidarity that transcend group boundaries (hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1991; Harnois 2015; Hill Collins 2000). In this view, political engagement is not only a response to individual harm, but may also be a form of resistance to intersecting systems of oppression, including sexism, racism, and social or environmental inequalities. Feminist theory thereby moves beyond group-based grievance models by illustrating the interconnectedness of social divisions (Yuval-Davis 1997).

Insights from political psychology further explain how such solidaristic engagement may emerge by identifying individual-level mechanisms that link experiences of injustice to empathetic forms of political participation. Group empathy theory (e.g., Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017) proposes that individuals who have personally experienced discrimination are more likely to empathize with other marginalized groups. Empirical studies confirm this pattern among minorities exposed to racial discrimination (e.g., Carey and Lizotte 2023; Eidgahy and Pérez 2023; Pérez 2021a, 2021b; Pérez et al.

2021; Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017). These findings suggest that personal experiences of injustice are associated with a broader sense of solidarity grounded in shared structural disadvantages. Related research supports this interpretation, showing that discrimination experiences correlate with greater empathy, altruism, and generalized support for social justice (e.g., Fike et al. 2023; Vollhardt 2009).⁴

Taken together, these perspectives indicate that experiences of gender-based discrimination are linked to the development of a broader egalitarian consciousness and coalition-oriented engagement across issue domains.⁵ By integrating RDT's emphasis on motivational dynamics, feminist theory's structural perspective, and group empathy theory's psychological insights, this study proposes a comprehensive framework for understanding how gender-based discrimination experiences are associated with cross-issue engagement.

Hypothesis 1: *Women who report gender-based discrimination experiences are more likely to engage politically not only in support of women's rights but also in other issue areas such as anti-racism, labor and social rights, and environmentalism.*

The role of political ideology as moderator

The extent to which experiences of gender-based discrimination are associated with political engagement may depend on individuals' ideological orientations. Political ideology shapes how people interpret and emotionally evaluate such experiences. For instance, Bankert (2020) finds that experiences of sexism are linked to higher levels of political engagement among liberal women, whereas no comparable relationship emerges among conservatives.

This asymmetry likely reflects ideological differences in how women interpret experiences of gender-based discrimination. Liberal women are more likely to perceive instances of disrespect or harassment as unjust and politically relevant, thereby connecting these experiences to broader collective concerns. Conservative women, by contrast, tend to downplay or depoliticize such experiences, framing them as matters of personal responsibility or as normal rather than structural injustice (Bankert 2020; Cassese and Barnes 2019). These diverging interpretations are associated with distinct emotional responses: anger and collective outrage among liberals – emotions linked to participation – versus shame or anxiety among conservatives – emotions that are more often associated with withdrawal or disengagement (e.g., Huddy et al. 2005; Shepherd 2019).

Building on this research, this study examines whether these mechanisms – previously documented primarily in the US – also hold in the German context. This case provides an important opportunity to assess the generalizability of ideology-based differences in the political implications of gender-based discrimination within a European welfare-state setting characterized by high formal gender equality but persistent everyday sexism.

Accordingly, I hypothesize that political ideology moderates the relationship between gender-based discrimination and political engagement. The association is expected to be strongest among left-leaning women, who tend to perceive such experiences as part of broader structural inequality, and weaker or absent among right-leaning women, who are less likely to interpret them as politically relevant.

Hypothesis 1b: *The positive association between gender-based discrimination experiences and political engagement is moderated by political ideology, holding primarily among left-leaning women and being weak or absent among right-leaning women.*

At the same time, political ideology not only influences reactions to discrimination but also its recognition and reporting. Conservative women, who tend to emphasize personal responsibility and endorse traditional gender norms, have been found less likely to identify certain situations as

discriminatory (Bankert 2020). Consequently, the absence of a relationship between discrimination and engagement among right-leaning women may partly reflect lower levels of perceived or reported sexism, rather than a genuine lack of association.

Hypothesis 1c: *Right-leaning women are less likely to perceive or report gender-based discrimination.*

Recognizability and attribution: why the form of discrimination matters

While experiences of discrimination are often associated with heightened political awareness and engagement, not all forms are equally likely to be politicized. A growing body of research suggests that the form of discrimination – overt or subtle – shapes how individuals perceive and respond to such experiences (El-Mafaalani et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2016; Kawakami, Francine, and Elysia 2019). In contemporary European societies, where formal equality is legally protected, overt acts of discrimination have become less frequent and are often less visible. As a result, bias increasingly manifests in more subtle ways, such as microaggressions, exclusion, or stereotypical assumptions (Fibbi, Midtbøen, and Simon 2021).

Prior research indicates that subtle discrimination may be just as harmful, if not more so, than overt forms. Singletary (2009), for instance, found declines in women's workplace performance following subtle forms of gender-based discrimination, whereas overt experiences had no comparable effect. Regarding political engagement, two competing mechanisms are conceivable.

First, subtle forms of discrimination may be associated with lower levels of political participation. They occur more frequently (Utsey et al. 2002; Yoo, Steger, and Lee 2010), are harder to recognize and attribute to an external source, and therefore are more likely to be internalized and blamed on the self (Hart 2021; Jones et al. 2016; Singletary 2009). In addition, they often lack legal recognition and institutional acknowledgment, which can weaken perceptions of injustice and hinder collective attribution. In contrast, overt discrimination – precisely because it is visible, unambiguous, and socially recognizable – is more likely to be interpreted as an injustice rather than a personal shortcoming. This attributional clarity can evoke strong emotions, such as anger, and a heightened sense of group-based disadvantage, both of which are known drivers of political mobilization (Miller and Krosnick 2004; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008).

Hypothesis 2a: *Overt forms of gender-based discrimination are more strongly associated with political engagement than subtle forms.*

Second, overt experiences are not necessarily associated with higher political engagement and may coincide with withdrawal or fear, particularly when incidents are severe, repeated, or perceived as threatening. Subtle forms of discrimination, by contrast, may be less intimidating and more conducive to reflection, recognition, and politicization over time. In this sense, subtle everyday sexism may relate to more sustained forms of engagement, as it allows for emotional distance and cognitive processing that can support solidarity, rather than avoidance driven by anxiety.

Hypothesis 2b: *Subtle forms of gender-based discrimination are more strongly associated with political engagement than overt forms.*

Finally, the relative salience of overt and subtle discrimination experiences may differ across issue domains. The mechanisms outlined above appear most relevant for causes that directly address inequality and discrimination and are linked to experiences of physical or symbolic violence, such as women's rights and anti-racism. In these contexts, overt experiences may resonate more strongly and align with identification processes related to the cause. By contrast, in issue areas less directly connected to marginalized groups or violent practices, such as environmental or social rights activism,

subtle forms of discrimination may play a greater role. Due to their diffuse and often ambiguous nature, subtle experiences may foster cognitive reflection and generalized awareness of structural unfairness, which may in turn strengthen egalitarian orientations and motivate engagement with broader, non-identity-based causes.

Hypothesis 2c: *The relative importance of subtle and overt discrimination differs across issue domains, with overt forms more strongly associated with engagement for groups affected by physical and symbolic violence, and subtle forms with engagement on broader, non-identity-based causes.*

Institutional versus societal discrimination

The political relevance of discrimination experiences may vary not only by their form but also by their source. Prior research – particularly in the context of racial and ethnic discrimination – shows that experiences of inequality occurring in institutional or political settings differ from those encountered in everyday social life (Oskooii 2016, 2020).

Institutional discrimination, such as unequal treatment by public authorities, educational institutions, or employers, can make visible the political system's involvement in sustaining inequality. Because it occurs within formal power structures, such discrimination is more likely to be interpreted as a violation of democratic norms and might therefore be connected to political engagement aimed at institutional reform.

Everyday discrimination, by contrast, typically occurs in informal social contexts, such as public spaces or leisure settings. Such experiences may not immediately appear political. However, feminist theory has long emphasized that the personal and the political are deeply intertwined (hooks 1984; Hanisch 2006). The public visibility of movements such as #MeToo also illustrates how individual experiences of everyday sexism can be collectively interpreted as structural injustice. In this sense, everyday sexism may cultivate feminist consciousness and solidaristic orientations precisely because it reveals the pervasiveness of gender hierarchies in everyday social life rather than in formal institutions alone (Nentwich and Kelan 2013). Shared recognition of these experiences can foster empathy, mutual identification, and a generalized commitment to social justice.

At the same time, institutional and everyday discrimination may differ in their emotional and behavioral consequences. While institutional discrimination may be related to anger and system-challenging responses, everyday discrimination may be associated with a slower process of reflection and meaning-making that builds solidaristic engagement over time. From this perspective, experiences of discrimination may politicize in distinct ways depending on their source: institutional discrimination by highlighting systemic injustice, and societal discrimination by fostering shared awareness of normalized inequality.

H3a: *Institutional forms of gender-based discrimination are expected to show a closer association with engagement in issue areas that address formal power structures, as they are more directly connected to perceptions of systemic inequality.*

H3b: *Everyday forms of gender-based discrimination are expected to show a similarly strong or broader association with engagement across issue domains, reflecting increasing politicization of societal experiences emphasized in feminist discourse.*

The consequences of cumulative discrimination

While gender-based discrimination has been linked to higher levels of political engagement, women's experiences of discrimination are far from uniform. Depending on their intersecting

social identities and social positions, they encounter discrimination in different forms and intensities. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000) emphasizes that discrimination must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than along a single axis of identity, since individuals may face overlapping and interdependent forms of disadvantage. Accordingly, while some women primarily encounter gender-based discrimination, others are additionally affected by racism, classism, ageism, ableism, or other forms of bias.

When considering the relationship between multiple forms of discrimination and political engagement, two competing mechanisms can be theorized.

First, experiencing injustice across several social dimensions may heighten awareness of systemic inequality and foster a sense of collective identity and “linked fate.” Prior research indicates that women exposed to intersecting forms of discrimination tend to report higher levels of political consciousness and engagement (Chan and Jasso 2023; Crenshaw 1989; Macías Mejía 2024; Nguy, Davis, and Chan 2025). The accumulation of discrimination experiences across various identity categories may therefore amplify perceptions of injustice, strengthen collective efficacy, and position intersectionally marginalized women as key political actors.

Hypothesis 4a: *The positive association between gender-based discrimination and political engagement is expected to be stronger among women who report additional types of discrimination.*

Second, prior research links discrimination experiences to adverse outcomes for mental and physical health (e.g., Weeks and Sullivan 2019; Yoon, Coburn, and Spence 2019), including lower self-esteem, higher levels of depression, and feelings of powerlessness (e.g., Pascoe and Smart Richman 2009). Such psychological strains are associated with reduced political efficacy and lower levels of participation (Kirbiš, Mattila, and Rapeli 2024; Ojeda 2015; Ojeda and Pacheco 2017). These constraining patterns may be particularly pronounced among individuals exposed to multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination.

Hypothesis 4b: *The positive association between gender-based discrimination and political engagement is expected to be weaker, or potentially absent, among individuals who report additional types of discrimination.*

Data and methods

This study draws on data from the DeZIM panel (Dollmann et al. 2024), a nationwide online panel administered by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). The sample includes an intentional oversample of individuals with immigration histories to better capture Germany’s post-migrant society (Dollmann et al. 2022; Foroutan 2019) and to allow for nuanced analyses of discrimination experiences across social groups. The recruitment wave of the DeZIM panel was fielded between March and September 2021 and yielded responses from 9,168 individuals, including 2,580 foreign-born immigrants (28%) and 1,254 direct descendants of immigrants (14%).

The present analysis is limited to respondents who self-identify as female. To ensure sufficient statistical power for subgroup comparisons, only data from the recruitment wave are used. Consequently, causal inferences cannot be drawn. However, prior experimental research (see Bankert 2020) provides evidence that the experience of gender-based discrimination can increase political activism, suggesting that a similar causal mechanism may operate here. All analyses employ design-based weights to account for sample composition and oversampling.

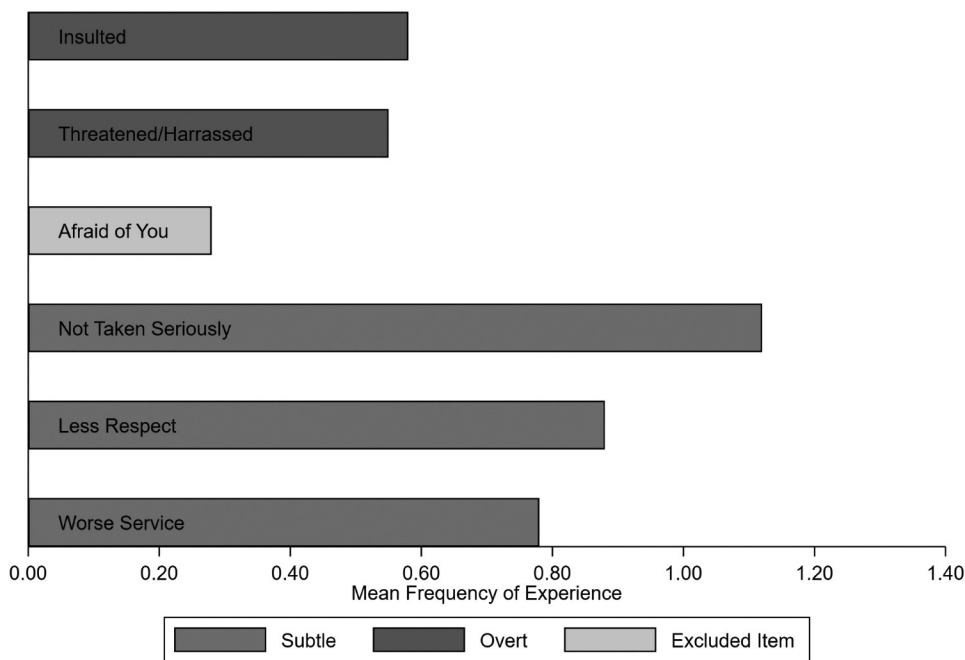


Figure 1. Average Reported Frequency of Subtle and Overt Gender-Based Discrimination Experiences, Female Respondents of the DeZIM.Panel.

Measurement of gender-based discrimination experiences

Gender-based discrimination experiences were measured using a reduced version of the Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS) (Williams et al. 1997). The EDS captures the frequency of different discriminatory experiences, their perceived causes, and the life domains in which they occurred (Harnois 2022; Seabra et al. 2024). Respondents were first asked how often they had experienced several discriminatory situations (0=’Never’ to 5=’Daily’): *being insulted*, *being threatened/harassed*, *being treated as if someone else was afraid of you*, *not being taken seriously*, *being treated with less respect than others*, and *receiving worse service than others*.

In a follow-up question, respondents indicated the perceived reason(s) for these experiences. Those who selected “due to gender” were categorized as having experienced gender-based discrimination. The overall index combines responses across five items. The item *being treated as if someone else was afraid of you* was excluded, because it is more typical for racialized or masculinized discrimination and less consistent with the forms of gender-based discrimination most commonly reported by women (e.g., infantilization or belittlement, rather than fear). The overall index captures the general frequency with which respondents reported gender-related unfair treatment.

To examine whether the association between discrimination and engagement varies by form, the items were grouped into overt (insulted, threatened/harassed) and subtle (not being taken seriously, treated with less respect, received worse service) categories. Figure 1 1 presents mean frequency scores across items, disaggregated by form (overt vs. subtle).

Factor structure: overt vs. subtle discrimination

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported a two-factor structure (Appendix, Table 5). The items *not being taken seriously*, *being treated with less respect*, and *receiving worse service* loaded on a latent

factor representing subtle discrimination, whereas *being threatened/harassed* and *being insulted* loaded on a second factor reflecting overt discrimination.⁶

As expected, the item *being treated as if someone was afraid of you* did not load clearly on either factor and was excluded due to limited conceptual relevance for gendered power asymmetries.

Based on this structure, two composite indices were constructed to represent the frequency of subtle and overt discrimination experiences.

Institutional/political vs. societal/everyday discrimination

This study distinguishes between institutional or political and societal or everyday discrimination, based on a follow-up question in the EDS module asking how often (0 = Never to 4 = Very often) respondents had experienced unjust treatment in various domains:

- “public authorities or administrative offices (e.g., registration offices, immigration authorities, job centers),”
- “the educational system (e.g., schools, universities),”
- “the labor market (e.g., job search, training, workplace),”
- “the housing market (e.g., renting or purchasing housing),”
- “public spaces (e.g., streets, public transportation),”
- “leisure settings (e.g., clubs, associations, nightlife).”

Following prior research and conceptual considerations, experiences in public authorities, education, and the labor market were classified as institutional or political discrimination, as these involve interactions with or within state institutions and structurally regulated systems.

Experiences in public and leisure settings were categorized as societal or everyday discrimination, as they reflect informal, interpersonal encounters in social life. Respondents who did not report any gender-based discrimination in step one were coded as zero.

The housing market was excluded because it can involve both institutional and private actors, making its classification conceptually ambiguous. The labor market, while it can also involve private actors, was retained within the institutional/political index due to its centrality in gender-based inequality and its classification as an institutional context in prior research (Oskooii 2016, 2020). Robustness checks using only public authorities and education yielded substantively similar results.

Additional discrimination experiences

To examine whether and how additional experiences of discrimination shape the relationship between gender-based discrimination and political engagement, a categorical variable was constructed distinguishing three groups:

- 0: no experiences of discrimination,
- 1: gender-based discrimination only,
- 2: gender-based discrimination combined with at least one additional type of discrimination (e.g., racism, ageism, classism, ableism).

This operationalization captures both the presence of gender-based discrimination and the cumulative nature of overlapping disadvantages, allowing to examine whether the association between gender-based discrimination and engagement differs when additional forms of bias are experienced.

Table 1. Mean Values (SD) of Discrimination and Engagement Variables Among Female Respondents of the DeZIM.Panels, by Migration Status.

	Total	Natives	Immigrants	Descendants
Gender-Based Discrimination (0–5)	0.46 (0.69)	0.51 (0.68)	0.22 (0.55)	0.53 (0.80)
Form				
Subtle (0–5)	0.52 (0.79)	0.57 (0.78)	0.26 (0.66)	0.61 (0.94)
Overt (0–5)	0.37 (0.65)	0.42 (0.66)	0.16 (0.47)	0.41 (0.71)
Domain				
Institutional/Political (0–4)	0.17 (0.40)	0.16 (0.36)	0.13 (0.40)	0.28 (0.56)
Societal/Everyday (0–4)	0.37 (0.70)	0.41 (0.71)	0.19 (0.52)	0.45 (0.83)
Cumulative Discrimination Experiences	1.06 (0.83)	1.10 (0.80)	0.76 (0.90)	1.14 (0.86)
0 = No discrimination				
1 = Gender-based discrimination only				
2 = Gender-based + ≥1 additional type				
Engagement Issue				
Women's Rights Engagement (0/1)	0.20 (0.40)	0.19 (0.39)	0.21 (0.40)	0.28 (0.45)
Anti-Racist Engagement (0/1)	0.24 (0.42)	0.22 (0.41)	0.22 (0.41)	0.35 (0.48)
Environmental Engagement (0/1)	0.36 (0.48)	0.37 (0.48)	0.28 (0.45)	0.37 (0.48)
Social/Worker's Rights Engagement (0/1)	0.15 (0.35)	0.15 (0.36)	0.11 (0.31)	0.19 (0.39)

Measurement of political engagement

Political engagement was measured across four issue areas: women's rights, anti-racism, labor or social rights, and environmental protection. Respondents first indicated whether they had participated in any political activity during the past 12 months (e.g., attending a demonstration or signing a petition). They then identified the issues their engagement concerned. Binary indicators were created for each issue area.

Controls

The analyses include several control variables. Most importantly, political ideology – measured as left/right self-placement on a 10-point scale – receives particular attention. Additional controls include migration status (distinguishing immigrants, descendants of immigrants, and women without recent immigration histories), German citizenship (yes/no), age (categorical), education (low/mid/high), household income, and political interest (0–4 scale).

Descriptive overview

Table 1 summarizes mean scores for all key variables, disaggregated by migration status. This distinction is made because prior research shows that immigrants and their descendants in Germany are disproportionately affected by discrimination. Among all female respondents of the DeZIM.paneel, 43%⁷ reported gender-based discrimination experiences.

Women without recent immigration histories and descendants of immigrants reported higher average frequencies of such experiences (means = 0.51 and 0.53 on a 0–5 scale, respectively) than immigrant women (0.22). Across all groups, subtle forms of discrimination were reported more frequently than overt ones. Descendants showed the highest levels across several dimensions: institutional discrimination (mean = 0.28 on a 0–4 scale), societal discrimination (0.45), and cumulative experiences.

This group was also the most politically active across nearly all domains, except for environmental activism, where those without recent immigration histories reported comparable engagement levels. Interestingly, immigrant women reported higher engagement in women's rights activism than natives, despite indicating lower frequencies of gender-based discrimination. This apparent discrepancy may point to differences in how discrimination is recognized and reported among immigrant women – an important question for future research but beyond the scope of this article.

Analytical approach

A series of multivariable logistic regression models were estimated to test the formulated hypotheses. All models include the above listed control variables (see also full models in the Appendix) and apply appropriate survey weights. Statistical analyses were conducted using Stata, version 17.

Findings

Gender-based discrimination experiences and cross-issue engagement

Figure 2 displays the average marginal effects of gender-based discrimination experiences on political engagement across four issue areas, derived from logistic regression models (detailed estimates reported in Appendix, Table 6). Across all models, gender-based discrimination is positively and significantly associated with political engagement – not only in support of women’s rights, but also in anti-racist activism, environmental advocacy, and labor or social rights.

Not surprisingly, the strongest association appears for engagement in support of women’s rights: a one-unit increase in the reported frequency of gender-based discrimination corresponds to an estimated 15 percentage-point higher probability of engagement. The coefficients for the other issue areas are likewise substantial and statistically significant, corresponding to approximately 9 percentage points for anti-racist activism, 11 for environmental engagement, and 8 for social and workers’ rights.

The models control for a range of sociodemographic and attitudinal variables, including migration status, education, income, political interest, and left-right self-placement. Notably, immigrant women are estimated to have a significantly higher probability of engaging in women’s rights activism (around 10 percentage points higher than natives), whereas descendants of immigrants display significantly higher levels of engagement in anti-racist causes. Consistent with previous research, political interest

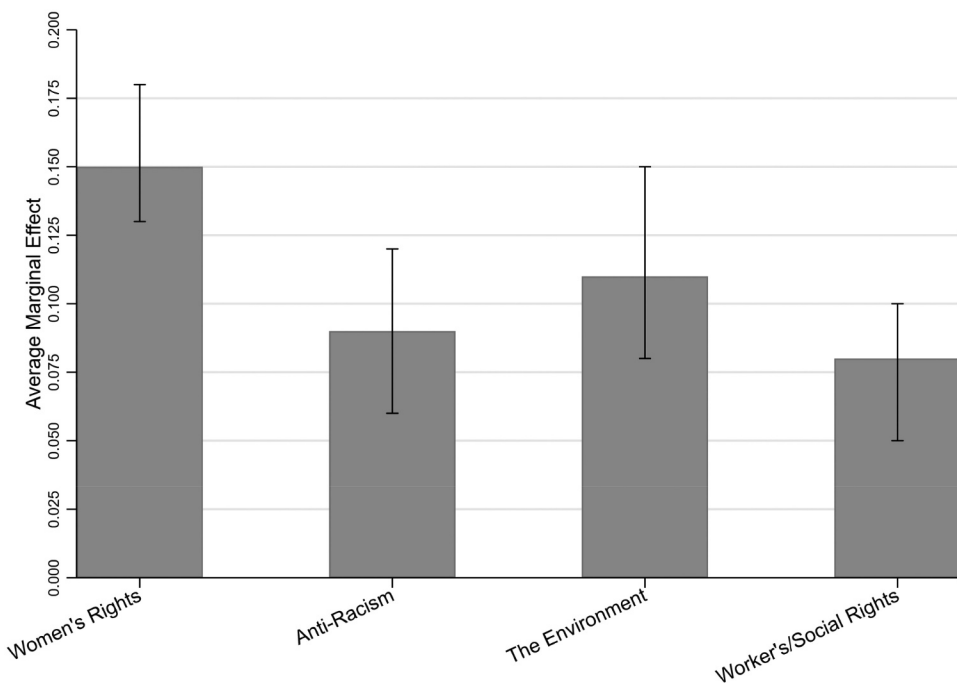


Figure 2. Average Marginal Effects of Gender-Based Discrimination Experiences on Engagement Across Four Issue Domains.

and left-leaning ideological orientation are strongly associated with increased engagement across all four issue areas.

In sum, these findings support Hypothesis 1, indicating that gender-based discrimination experiences are linked to broader forms of political engagement across issue domains. Rather than being confined to in-group advocacy, such experiences appear to coincide with broader forms of solidaristic engagement across political issues and social groups.

Challenges in examining the role of political ideology

To further examine the role of political ideology, an interaction term between gender-based discrimination and respondents' leftright self-placement was estimated (Appendix, Table 7). Contrary to expectations, the interaction effect is not statistically significant, providing no direct support for Hypothesis 1b.

Nevertheless, political ideology itself exerts a strong and consistent association with engagement across all models: more right-leaning ideology is significantly and negatively associated with political engagement in every issue area. This pattern aligns with prior research showing that conservative orientations tend to reduce perceptions of injustice and mobilization around equality-related causes.

The margins plots (Figure 3) for the different issue areas reveal clear but statistically insignificant patterns suggesting that the positive association between discrimination experiences and engagement in women's rights and anti-racist activism tends to weaken as respondents place themselves further to the right on the ideological scale.

One likely reason for the lack of statistical significance is that political ideology itself influences the reporting of gender-based discrimination experiences. Supplemental analyses (not displayed) confirm a strong, statistically significant relationship between political ideology and the likelihood of reporting gender-based discrimination, consistent with prior findings that right-leaning individuals are less likely to perceive or report such experiences (Bankert 2020). This pattern reduces variation and is

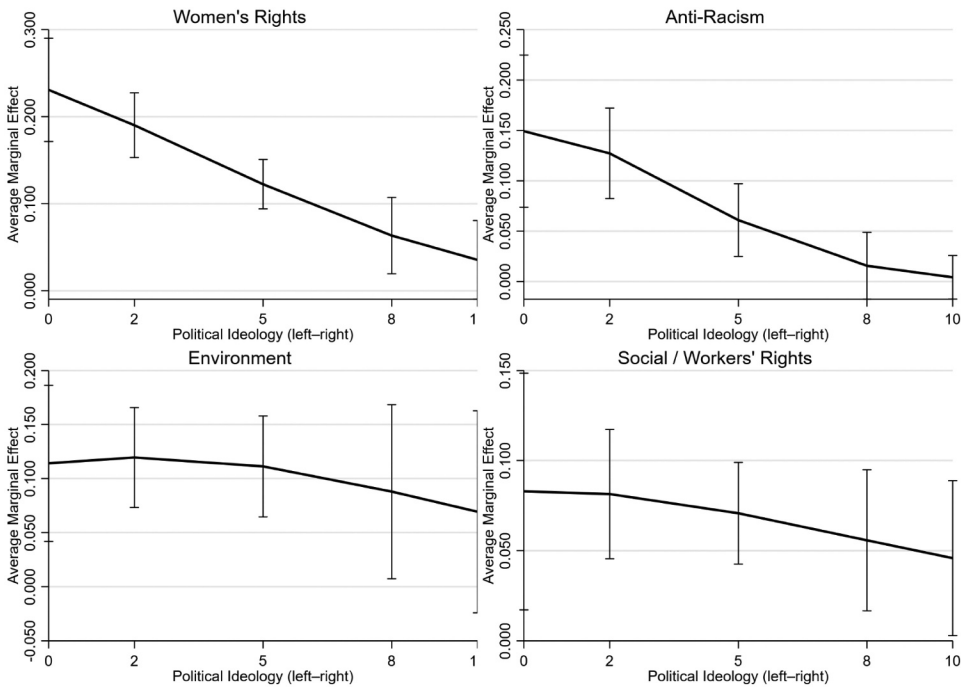


Figure 3. Average Marginal Effects of Gender-Based Discrimination Across Political Ideology, by Issue Area (Not Significant).

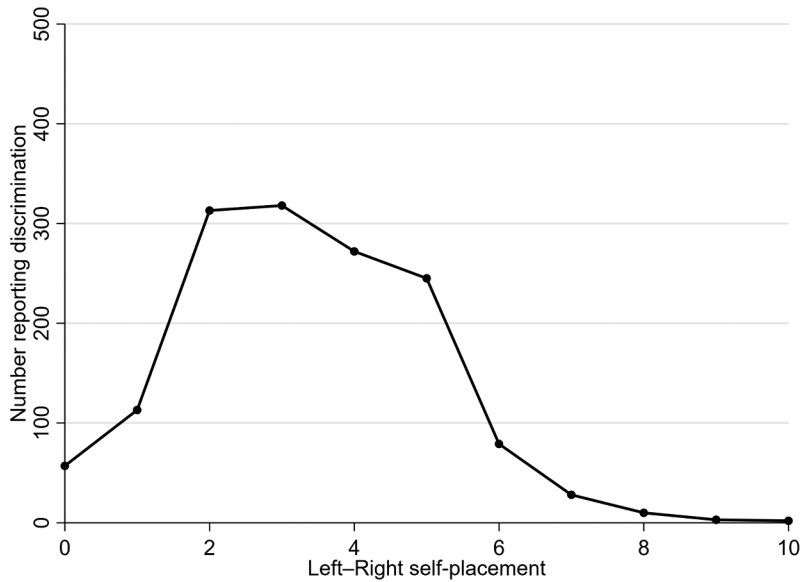


Figure 4. Number of Respondents Reporting Gender-Based Discrimination, by Left-Right-Self-Placement.

linked to substantially smaller case numbers among right-leaning respondents, reducing statistical power to detect an interaction.

Figure 4 illustrates this pattern. The number of respondents reporting gender-based discrimination declines sharply beyond the midpoint of the ideological scale: while more than 100 cases are observed up to point 5 (and over 300 at points 2–3), frequencies drop below 100 at point 6, fall to 28 at point 7, and approach zero beyond that. These extremely small cell sizes among right-leaning women preclude reliable estimation of moderation effects.

Taken together, these results offer partial support for H1c, suggesting that the absence of a significant moderation effect likely reflects ideological differences in the perception and reporting of discrimination experiences rather than a genuine absence of moderation. Given the substantive relevance of this question, future research should reexamine the role of political ideology using larger samples or alternative measures of discrimination perception.

In sum, the association between gender-based discrimination and political engagement appears most robust among women positioned at the center and left of the ideological spectrum, while a data-driven blind spot remains for right-leaning women due to low reporting frequencies of gender-based discrimination.

The form of discrimination matters

Table 2 reports the average marginal effects from four logistic regression models examining how subtle and overt gender-based discrimination experiences relate to political engagement across issue domains. The corresponding full models are presented in Appendix Table 8.

Table 2. Average Marginal Effects of Subtle and Overt Discrimination on Political Engagement.

	M9: Women's Rights	M10: Anti-Racism	M11: The Environment	M12: Social/Worker's Rights
Subtle Experiences	0.05** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.04** (0.01)
Overt Experiences	0.11*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.02)

Both forms of discrimination are significantly associated with engagement in women’s rights activism, however the association with overt experiences is notably stronger: a one-unit increase in overt discrimination corresponds to an approximately 11 percentage point higher probability of engagement ($p < 0.001$), compared to 5 percentage points for subtle experiences ($p < 0.01$). For anti-racist engagement, only overt discrimination experiences show a significant association (≈ 9 percentage point increase, $p < 0.001$). By contrast, for environmental and social/worker’s rights activism, only subtle discrimination experiences are significantly associated with participation (≈ 8 and 4 percentage points, $p < 0.001$ and $p < 0.01$, respectively).

Overall, the results provide partial support for the formulated hypotheses. Consistent with H2a, overt discrimination experiences are more strongly associated with engagement for women’s rights and anti-racist activism. In contrast, for environmental and social/worker’s rights activism, only subtle experiences show significant associations, lending support to H2b.

Finally, the findings support H2c, indicating that the relationship between the form of discrimination and political engagement differs across issue domains. Overt discrimination appears most strongly associated with activism addressing groups affected by direct or symbolic violence (e.g., women and racialized minorities), whereas subtle discrimination is more closely associated with engagement in broader, non-identity-based causes.

The salience of societal discrimination

Table 3 reports the average marginal effects from four logistic regression models examining how institutional/political and societal/everyday experiences of gender-based discrimination relate to political engagement across issue areas (full models in Appendix, Table 9). In contrast to previous findings on racial and ethnic discrimination – where institutional experiences often play a central mobilizing role (Oskooii 2016, 2020) – the present analysis shows that, for gender-based discrimination, societal/everyday experiences display stronger and more consistent associations with engagement across issue domains.

Specifically, institutional discrimination shows positive and statistically significant associations with engagement in women’s rights and social and labor rights activism, but not in other domains. Societal discrimination, by contrast, is significantly related to engagement across all four issue areas.

These findings lend support to H3a and H3b by indicating that institutional and societal experiences of gender-based discrimination may have distinct patterns of political relevance. Institutional forms appear more closely linked to activism that targets formal structures and power hierarchies, while societal or everyday discrimination shows broader associations with diverse issue areas. This

Table 3. Average Marginal Effects of Institutional and Societal Discrimination on Political Engagement.

	M9: Women’s Rights	M10: Anti-Racism	M11: The Environment	M12: Social/Worker’s Rights
Institutional Discrimination	0.06* (0.03)	–0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.08*** (0.02)
Societal Discrimination	0.10*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.04** (0.01)

Table 4. Average Marginal Effects of Cumulative Discrimination Experiences on Political Engagement.

	M17: Women’s Rights	M18: Anti-Racism	M19: The Environment	M20: Social/Worker’s Rights
Cumulative experiences (Ref: no discrimination)				
1: only gender-based discrimination	0.25*** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.04)	0.10** (0.03)
2: gender-based + ≥ 1 other type	0.27*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.04)	0.21*** (0.04)	0.16*** (0.03)

pattern aligns with feminist arguments emphasizing that the personal and the everyday are deeply political, and that shared recognition of sexism in daily life can foster solidaristic orientations that extend beyond institutional contexts.

Cumulative discrimination experiences

Table 4 reports the average marginal effects from four logistic regression models examining the association between cumulative discrimination experiences and political engagement (full models in Appendix, Table 10). The results show that both women who report only gender-based discrimination and those who report additional forms of discrimination – such as racist, ageist, or ableist experiences – display highly significant positive associations with political engagement across all four issue areas.

While the coefficients appear slightly stronger for women exposed to multiple forms of discrimination – particularly with respect to women’s rights, anti-racist, and social and labor rights activism – these differences are not statistically significant. Therefore, H4a and H4b must both be rejected.

Overall, however, the results suggest that experiencing multiple forms of discrimination may be associated with higher – rather than lower – levels of political engagement. This pattern aligns with intersectional perspectives emphasizing that women affected by multiple forms of disadvantage often develop a particularly strong awareness of inequality and a strong sense of shared responsibility for change (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000). The findings suggest that overlapping barriers can be associated with solidaristic forms of engagement that reflect agency and political awareness across issue boundaries.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined how gender-based discrimination experiences are related to cross-issue political engagement, and how that engagement is influenced by forms, sources, and cumulative types of discrimination. Drawing on an integrated framework combining feminist theory, relative deprivation theory, and group empathy theory, the paper makes five key contributions with important implications for theory and practice.

First, gender-based discrimination experiences show positive associations with political engagement across multiple issue areas, including not only women’s rights but also anti-racism, environmental justice, and social and labor rights. This pattern supports the argument that feminist consciousness, when grounded in perceived injustice, can be linked to cross-issue forms of activism that extend beyond in-group boundaries (Hooks 1984; Harnois 2015; Hill Collins 2000). It also aligns with group empathy theory (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017), which posits that individuals who experience marginalization are more likely to express solidarity with other disadvantaged groups. While the analyses rely on cross-sectional data and therefore cannot identify causal pathways, the observed associations are consistent with theoretical expectations about how perceptions of gendered injustice may relate to broader forms of political engagement. Experimental evidence by Bankert (2020) further supports this interpretation by demonstrating that recalling experiences of sexism can increase women’s political engagement, particularly among liberals. Together, these findings suggest that gender-based discrimination may operate as a politically relevant experience linked to broader egalitarian orientations rather than solely in-group activism.

Second, distinguishing between overt and subtle forms of discrimination reveals clear issue-specific patterns. Overt discrimination is more strongly associated with engagement in women’s rights and anti-racist activism, whereas subtle discrimination relates more closely to environmental and social or labor rights activism. This indicates that the political salience of discrimination forms varies across issue domains: overt forms appear to be more closely linked to activism addressing groups exposed to physical or symbolic violence (e.g., women and racialized minorities), while subtle forms are associated with participation in broader, non – identity-based causes.

Third, in contrast to findings for racialized minorities (Oskooii 2016, 2020), this study shows that, for gender-based discrimination, societal or everyday experiences are more consistently linked to engagement than institutional forms. This pattern aligns with insights from feminist theory that the personal and the private are inherently political (hooks 1984; Hanisch 2006). Future research should further investigate how feminist consciousness may develop differently in response to societal/everyday versus institutional/political discrimination and how these distinct experiences are reflected in varying forms of political engagement.

Fourth, women exposed to cumulative experiences of discrimination are at least equally likely to engage politically as those who only experience gender-based discrimination. This pattern aligns with intersectional perspectives that emphasize heightened awareness of structural inequality and potentially stronger engagement among individuals facing multiple disadvantages (Chan and Jasso 2023; Crenshaw 1989; Macías Mejía 2024; Nguy, Davis, and Chan 2025). However, in the present data, no significant differences between those who experienced only gender-based discrimination and those who also experienced additional types could be found. Future research should examine the relevance of intersectional approaches for understanding variation in political participation among women more closely.

Fifth, the results point to clear ideological differences in the recognition and reporting of gender-based discrimination. Women who identify on the political right are significantly less likely to perceive or report such experiences, resulting in reduced variation and limited analytical leverage for this group. As Cassese and Barnes (2019) argue, the tendency to downplay or deny discrimination can itself be understood as a form of modern sexism, reflecting internalized gender hierarchies and potentially constraining solidarity among women.

Beyond these substantive findings, the analysis of this paper has several limitations. The analyses rely on perceived discrimination, meaning that the observed associations depend on whether individuals identify and report discriminatory experiences. While this introduces a subjective dimension, perceived discrimination is itself theoretically meaningful, as it captures the cognitive and emotional processes through which individuals interpret inequality and attribute social meaning to their experiences. Future research should replicate the analyses with alternative or more objective measures of discrimination.

A second limitation concerns potential reverse causality and political exposure: politically active women may be more likely to perceive or encounter discrimination due to their visibility and participation in public and political life. Accordingly, the analyses identify associations rather than causal effects. Nonetheless, prior experimental evidence (Bankert 2020) demonstrates that recalling experiences of sexism can increase women's political engagement, which lends support to the theoretical expectation that perceptions of injustice and political engagement are meaningfully related.

To ensure sufficient statistical power for subgroup comparisons, the analyses were limited to the recruitment wave of the DeZIM panel. As a result, organizational membership – a known predictor of political participation – could not be included in the main models. Robustness checks using later waves that contained this variable, however, led to consistent results. Another limitation concerns the measurement of discrimination frequency, which lacked a fixed time frame and may be influenced by respondents' age or memory. Moreover, future research should extend the analysis to the experiences of individuals who do not identify within binary gender categories. Although the present dataset contained too few cases for meaningful analysis, qualitative and mixed-method approaches could offer valuable insights into these experiences.

While this study focused on cumulative experiences of discrimination and their association with political engagement, future work should investigate how these dynamics differ across social groups. Lower reported levels of discrimination among immigrant women, for instance, may for example be linked to cross-national reference frames, differences in religious or ideological orientations, linguistic or cultural factors, trust in research institutions, or racialization processes that influence how discrimination is perceived. Examining these mechanisms could provide a more nuanced understanding of how intersecting identities condition both the recognition of discrimination and the political responses to it.

Finally, future work should explore how structural and emotional dimensions of injustice interact over time – ideally through longitudinal or qualitative designs that look at the pathways from personal perceptions of injustice to political action. Furthermore, feminist scholarship should continue to investigate how social positions shape not only exposure to inequality but also the ability to recognize, name, and resist it.

Notes

1. I understand the term female, just like the term woman, as a social structure that is closely related to inequality and recognize that gender identity cannot be fully captured by binary categories. While the instrument included a third gender option (diverse), very few participants selected it. The analytical focus on self-identified female respondents thus reflects the empirical scope of the data rather than an endorsement of binary gender norms. I acknowledge the limitations this imposes in terms of gender inclusivity and representation.
2. Discrimination here refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their (actual or perceived) membership of a specific social group (Pettigrew 1998; Quillian 2006; Wilkes and Wu 2019).
3. Discrimination can impair mental and physical health, lower perceived efficacy, lead to depression, and reduce trust and participation in political systems (e.g., Cano et al. 2016; Everett, Onge, and Mollborn 2016; Harnois and Bastos 2018; Kirbiš, Mattila, and Rapeli 2024; Kohlbrenner et al. 2016; Marcus, Russell Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Ojeda 2015; Ojeda and Pacheco 2017; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005).
4. While these studies focus largely on racial discrimination, the relationship between gender-based discrimination and empathy or altruistic behavior remains largely understudied. However, studies have consistently found that women tend to score higher than men in both empathy and altruism (Van der Graaff et al. 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2005; Zimmer-Gembeck, Geiger), likely due to gendered socialization processes and socially-constructed gender roles that reward women's relational sensitivity and caretaking behavior.
5. Although environmental concerns may appear less directly related to this logic, environmental justice scholarship emphasizes that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities in the Global South (Bullard 2000; Roberts and Parks 2006).
6. This distinction in overt and subtle discrimination is similar to Jones et al. (2016).
7. These percentages refer to additional calculations (not shown in the table) based on a binary variable indicating whether gender-based discrimination was experienced (yes or no).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Lisa Walter is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bamberg and a research associate at the Institute of Pedagogy at the University of Duisburg-Essen. Previously, she worked as a research associate for the German National Discrimination and Racism Monitor (NaDiRa), coordinated by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM). Her research interests include the consequences of discrimination for political and societal participation, the impact and challenges of political education interventions, and factors contributing to democratic resilience.

ORCID

Lisa Walter  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-1671-6918>

Data availability statement

The DeZIM.panel data that support the findings of this study can be requested via the following link: <https://www.dezim-institut.de/forschungsdatenzentrum-dezimfdz/datenarchiv/>

Use of AI tools

The author(s) used OpenAI's ChatGPT (version 4, accessed via ChatGPT Plus) to support the revision of language, improve clarity, and align the manuscript with formal journal requirements. All final decisions and edits were made by the author(s).

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