

Women and discrimination in engineering: A study of the Hidden Figures movie

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Abstract

Inspirational stories often motivate individuals to navigate life's challenges, and movies can powerfully shape how audiences understand social realities, including inequality and discrimination. Hidden Figures (2016) is one such movie that not only inspires but also reveals the systemic barriers faced by women of color working in scientific and engineering settings in the 1960s. This study examines how the movie portrays discrimination against three African American women such as Katherine Goble, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, who contributed significantly to NASA during a period marked by racial segregation and gender bias. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this research analyzes the script of the movie Hidden Figures to identify scenes, interactions, and narrative moments that illustrate racial, gender, and educational-based discrimination. The findings show that the three protagonists confront multiple layers of inequality: racial discrimination through public and workplace segregation, gender discrimination through assumptions of women's intellectual inferiority, and education-based discrimination through institutional policies that restrict access to engineering advancement. Overall, the study highlights how Hidden Figures not only inspires through its narrative of resilience but also exposes the systemic inequalities embedded within professional STEM environments. This contributes to a broader understanding of how media representations shape public awareness of discrimination in engineering and other technical fields.

Keywords: racial discrimination; gender discrimination; engineering; movie analysis, Hidden Figures movie

INTRODUCTION

Stories play an important role in shaping human understanding, not only by informing the mind but also by nurturing emotional insight. Narratives encountered through media, especially movies, can inspire, motivate, and influence how individuals perceive social realities (Badanta, 2022). Research by Muna et al. (2023) further explains that movies construct associative mental images that connect with viewers' sociohistorical experiences, enabling them to comprehend issues such as inequality and discrimination more deeply.

Hidden Figures (2016) is one such movie that offers both inspiration and critical reflection. Beyond its motivational appeal, the movie provides a powerful portrayal of how systemic discrimination historically shaped women's participation in scientific and engineering professions. Based on the real experiences of Katherine Goble, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, the movie foregrounds the challenges faced by women of color as they navigated a highly segregated and male-dominated engineering environment. As Blau (2017) explains, the protagonists' struggles reveal the structural inequalities embedded in American workplaces during the 1960s, when segregation laws and unequal access to professional opportunities limited the advancement of African American communities. Their achievements unfolded during the Civil Rights era, a period marked by efforts to dismantle institutionalized racism and promote equal rights.

These portrayals also resonate with contemporary discussions about diversity in STEM fields. Studies in engineering and STEM education consistently show that women, especially women of color, continue to face exclusion, stereotyping, and limited access to advancement (Fouad et al., 2017; Williams, Phillips, & Hall, 2014). These challenges reflect longstanding patterns

of bias rooted in historical gender and racial inequalities. In this context, *Hidden Figures* becomes a meaningful object of study for examining how discrimination against women in engineering is depicted, understood, and interpreted.

Despite significant progress since the 1960s, women and minorities still encounter various forms of discrimination in engineering, including implicit bias, unequal mentoring, and organizational cultures that remain hostile to women (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2020). Through its narrative of perseverance and resistance, *Hidden Figures* encourages viewers to reflect on both historical and ongoing challenges faced by women engineers, highlighting the ways discriminatory structures continue to shape modern professional environments (McClain, 2003, p. 123).

For these reasons, analyzing *Hidden Figures* offers more than a historical or cinematic exploration. The movie provides a lens through which the intersection of race, gender, and engineering can be understood, revealing how discrimination is portrayed, challenged, and negotiated within one of the most influential STEM institutions of the twentieth century. Accordingly, this study investigates how the movie represents racial and gender discrimination experienced by women of color in engineering, focusing on the scenes, interactions, and narrative moments that expose these systemic barriers.

Women in engineering and the persistence of gender inequality

Women's participation in engineering has increased over the past several decades, yet gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in the field. Research shows that engineering continues to operate within cultures that privilege men and reinforce traditional gender norms, often marginalizing women's contributions. Fouad et al. (2017) report that women in engineering frequently experience exclusion from informal networks, biased performance evaluations, and a lack of organizational support, all of which contribute to lower retention rates. Similarly, Williams et al. (2014) identify recurring patterns of discrimination, including stereotyping, heightened scrutiny, and limited access to advancement, that systematically disadvantage women engineers.

These gendered barriers are further shaped by institutional expectations that prioritize masculine-coded traits such as assertiveness and technical authority, while undervaluing collaboration and relational skills often associated with women (Faulkner, 2009). As a result, women in engineering must navigate professional environments where their competence is routinely questioned and their career progression constrained. Despite efforts to promote diversity in STEM, persistent gender inequality illustrates the deep-rooted structural forces that continue to limit women's full participation in engineering professions.

Discrimination theory

The Theory of Discrimination has been widely examined in economics, sociology, and psychology as a means of understanding unequal treatment and its consequences (McGowan, 2017, p. 45). In general terms, discrimination refers to the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or disability, resulting in unequal outcomes and constrained opportunities (Snyder, 2019, p. 335). Williams (2022, p. 5) adds that discrimination involves distinctions in treatment that privilege certain groups while disadvantaging others. This theoretical foundation is essential for understanding the systemic barriers that continue to affect women in engineering and other STEM professions.

Scholars often distinguish between two types of characteristics that shape discriminatory practices: ascriptive characteristics, which are assigned at birth or tied to social identity (e.g., race, gender, or age), and acquired characteristics, which include attributes gained through education, skills, or training (Posthuma, 2008, p. 659). Recognition of these categories helps explain how both social identity and professional qualifications can influence access to employment, wages, and career advancement. In engineering contexts, ascriptive characteristics such as gender frequently

overshadow acquired characteristics, meaning that women's technical credentials are often undervalued compared to their male counterparts.

Several theoretical frameworks attempt to explain why discrimination occurs. Taste-based discrimination theory proposes that unequal treatment stems from personal prejudice rather than rational decision-making. Statistical discrimination theory argues that employers rely on group-level stereotypes or statistical assumptions when evaluating individuals. Information asymmetry theory holds that discrimination arises from unequal access to information about workers' abilities or productivity. Finally, power-based theories view discrimination as a structural phenomenon rooted in unequal distributions of power and resources between social groups (Neumark, 2018, p. 45; Posthuma, 2008, p. 659). These theories are particularly useful for analyzing engineering workplaces, where long-standing male dominance, cultural gatekeeping, and institutional hierarchies can perpetuate exclusionary practices against women, especially women of color.

Taken together, these perspectives provide a strong conceptual framework for examining how the movie *Hidden Figures* portrays the racial and gender discrimination experienced by women working in technical and engineering environments.

Direct discrimination

Direct discrimination refers to treating individuals or groups differently based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or disability. This form of discrimination is often intentional and may arise from personal prejudice or explicit bias. Racial discrimination, for instance, involves unequal treatment based on racial or ethnic background—for example, when a person of color is denied a job or promotion solely due to race. Sex discrimination occurs when individuals are treated unequally based on gender, such as when women receive lower pay or are denied promotions despite performing the same job. Age discrimination involves unfavorable treatment toward individuals based on age, such as older workers being excluded from hiring or advancement opportunities (Lee, 2018, p. 20). Disability discrimination similarly occurs when people with disabilities are denied access, services, or opportunities because of their condition.

Together, these examples demonstrate how direct discrimination arises from explicit decisions or actions that deliberately disadvantage certain groups. However, discrimination does not always appear in overt or intentional forms. In many professional and institutional settings, including engineering workplaces, inequality is often reproduced through more subtle mechanisms. This leads to a second major category: indirect discrimination.

Indirect discrimination

Indirect discrimination occurs when policies or practices appear neutral on the surface but disproportionately disadvantage certain individuals or groups. Unlike direct discrimination, indirect discrimination may be unintentional; however, its effects are no less harmful. One form is education-based discrimination, where job requirements demand a specific level of education that members of certain racial or ethnic groups may not have had equal access to obtain. For example, a company may require advanced degrees for positions that do not genuinely need them, disproportionately limiting opportunities for marginalized groups. Another form is experience-based discrimination, which involves valuing certain types of experience that some groups are less likely to have due to unequal access to prior job opportunities (McClain, 2003, p. 123). Requirements for extensive experience can therefore reproduce structural disadvantage, even when presented as objective criteria.

Understanding both direct and indirect discrimination is essential for analyzing the layered forms of inequality portrayed in *Hidden Figures*, particularly as the movie demonstrates how women of color faced explicit prejudice as well as subtle institutional barriers within engineering and scientific environments.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, which is suitable for examining social phenomena through interpretation rather than numerical measurement. Qualitative research seeks to understand how individuals perceive and experience their surroundings, allowing researchers to explore behaviors, perspectives, and actions in depth (Synder, 2019, p. 335). In this study, qualitative methods were used to analyze the *Hidden Figures* movie and its script to describe how racial and gender discrimination are portrayed in the engineering workplace.

The data for this research consisted of scenes, dialogue, and narrative elements taken from the *Hidden Figures* (2016) movie and its official script. The analysis followed several stages commonly used in qualitative content analysis, including watching the movie, reading the script, identifying relevant data, classifying data based on research focus, and reducing data to select the most significant evidence.

First, the researcher watched the *Hidden Figures* movie in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of its storyline, character dynamics, and conflicts relevant to the research question (Neumark, 2018, p. 45). This step ensured familiarity with the plot and helped identify potential scenes reflecting discrimination. Second, the researcher read the movie script to locate specific dialogue and scenes that could serve as textual data. Script reading enabled careful extraction of quotations and narrative details that might not be fully captured through watching alone. Third, data identification was conducted by marking scenes and dialogue that indicated racial discrimination or gender discrimination. All potential evidence related to unequal treatment, workplace barriers, or discriminatory interactions was highlighted during this stage. Fourth, the identified data were classified according to the categories derived from the research focus namely, racial discrimination and gender discrimination. This classification process helped organize the data and align them with the study's analytical framework. Finally, data reduction was carried out by selecting only the strongest, most relevant evidence to be included in the findings and discussion. This step ensured that the analysis focused on scenes that clearly demonstrated the discriminatory experiences of women of color in engineering.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Types of discrimination in the *Hidden Figures* movie

Discrimination is commonly defined as the act of making distinctions or treating individuals or groups unfairly based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, or disability, often resulting in unequal outcomes (Aigner, 1977, p. 175). Scholars emphasize that discrimination is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that may appear in both visible and subtle forms. In general, two major categories are identified: direct discrimination, which involves explicit and unequal treatment based on racial or gender identity, and indirect discrimination, which occurs when ostensibly neutral policies or practices disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (Lundberg, 2018, p. 345).

In *Hidden Figures* (2016), both direct and indirect discrimination shape the experiences of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson as they work at NASA's Langley Research Center. Although they possess exceptional skills, they frequently encounter institutional barriers rooted in racial segregation and gender exclusion. These forms of discrimination not only limit their professional opportunities but also reflect the broader systemic inequalities faced by women of color in engineering during the 1960s.

The following sections explain in detail how racial and gender discrimination are portrayed in the movie and how they affect the three protagonists. Direct racial discrimination is evident throughout the movie, often portrayed through explicit acts of unequal treatment rooted in prejudice. The movie presents multiple scenes where the protagonists experience unequal treatment because they are African American women.

Police Inspection on the Way to Work

The movie opens with Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary being stopped and questioned by a white policeman simply because they are three African American women parked beside a broken-down car. Although they have committed no violation, the officer approaches them with suspicion. This scene illustrates direct racial discrimination, as the policeman's behavior is driven by racial prejudices rather than any legitimate concern. The depiction can be seen in the dialogue below:

White Cop: "You have identification on ya?"
Katherine jumps in.
Katherine: "We sure do. We're just on our way to work. At Langley."
Katherine pulls out her NASA ID badge. Holds it up for him to see.
Katherine (CONT'D): "NASA, sir."
Dorothy specifies, holding up her NASA badge.
Dorothy: "We do a great deal of the calculating, getting our rockets into space."
He turns his attention back to Mary.
White cop: "All three of ya?"
Mary: "Yes, officer."
Hmm. He takes Mary's badge. Studies it. Inspects the back. It's official.
White cop: "NASA. That's something. Had no idea they hired-"
He stops himself for saying "colored." Or worse. (Hidden Figures, 2016, p. 7).

In this quotation, the policeman is surprised and hesitates to believe that the three of them, colored women, are working for NASA. His act shows Direct Discrimination as a type of Racial Discrimination. Direct discrimination is often intentional and can be based on personal prejudice and biases (Haryanti, R.S, 2019, p. 426). White people often feel that they are superior to black people. Furthermore, they often have personal biases when it comes to black people. Moreover, the white policeman found it hard to believe that black women like Mary, Dorothy, and Katherine work in NASA, such a prestigious place.

Denial of access to informational and professional spaces

Beyond workplace segregation, the movie also illustrates racial discrimination through public institutional practices. One striking example occurs when Dorothy Vaughan is removed from the public library simply for entering the section designated for white patrons. In the scene, Dorothy selects a book from a shelf, prompting a white librarian to confront her:

She pulls it off the shelf. A WHITE LIBRARIAN in the next aisle stares back at her.
WHITE LIBRARIAN: "We don't want any trouble in here."
DOROTHY : "I'm not here for any trouble."
WHITE LIBRARIAN : "What are you here for?"
DOROTHY : "A Book"
WHITE LIBRARIAN : "You have books in the colored section"
DOROTHY : "It doesn't have what I'm looking for"
WHITE LIBRARIAN : "That's just the way it is." (Hidden Figures, 2016, pp. 55-56).

In this scene, it can be seen that the library is divided into two sections: white people and colored people. Furthermore, a colored woman like Dorothy is not allowed to enter that section of the library. This scene demonstrates direct racial discrimination through legal segregation, in which public spaces are divided into "white" and "colored" sections. Dorothy's removal from the library reflects what scholars define as segregation: "excluding members of a disadvantaged racial group from access to resources and public institutions." The librarian's insistence that Dorothy return to the "colored section" indicates that African Americans were systematically denied equal access to knowledge and educational materials.

This moment reinforces how segregation functions as a structural barrier, limiting Black women's ability to obtain the resources necessary for professional advancement. Dorothy is not seeking special treatment, only a book unavailable in the segregated section, yet she is treated as a threat. The librarian's phrase, "That's just the way it is," reflects the normalization of discrimination in everyday life. Within the movie's broader narrative, this event parallels the barriers the women face at NASA, illustrating how racial segregation restricts both public and professional spaces for women of color.

Similarly, racial discrimination is also faced by Dorothy in the professional space. Despite her exceptional leadership skills and dedication to her work, she will not be assigned as a supervisor. Her abilities are being underestimated due to her race. The reflection can be seen below:

Dorothy: "Mrs. Mitchell... if I could-"

Vivian stops. Turns back.

Dorothy (CONT'D): "My supervisor application, ma'am. Was wondering if they're still considering me for that position."

VIVIAN MITCHELL: "Yes. Well, the official word is: no. They're not assigning a permanent supervisor to the Colored Group."

Mrs. Mitchell is a white woman who works as a supervisor. In this scene, she tells Dorothy that she will not be assigned as a supervisor. She said that they do not need a supervisor in the colored group. As mentioned earlier, racial Discrimination involves treating individuals or groups differently based on their racial or ethnic background (Feagin, Joe R., and Melvin P. Sikes, 1994, p. 97). Through this scene, it can be seen that Dorothy is treated unfairly because she is a black woman. She does the work of a supervisor. She is in charge of the colored group. However, they will not let black people like Dorothy fill high positions as supervisors. They insist that the colored group does not need a supervisor. Therefore, even though she is assigned to work harder and has the responsibility of a supervisor, she still cannot fill a higher position and get a high salary.

Gendered barriers in professional recognition

Gender discrimination refers to the unequal treatment of individuals based on their sex or gender (Phelps, 1972, p. 659). According to McLean (1988), gender discrimination can appear in several forms, one of which is subordination—a process in which women are regarded as less capable or less rational than men. This form of discrimination is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue:

Jim Johnson: "Pastor mentioned you're a 'Computer' at NASA. What's that entail?"

KATHERINE: We calculate the mathematics necessary to enable launch and landing for the Space Program.

JIM JOHNSON: Aeronautics. Preddy heady stuff. They let women handle that kind of-
He stops himself. Too late. Backpedals.

JIM JOHNSON (CONT'D): Well. That's not what I mean.

KATHERINE: What do you mean?

JIM JOHNSON: I was just surprised something so...taxing-
Katherine stops him. (Hidden Figures, 2016, pp. 40-41)

In this scene, Jim Johnson questions Katherine's role after learning that she works in aeronautics, implying disbelief that a woman could perform such intellectually demanding tasks. This reflects direct gender discrimination in the form of subordination. Subordination occurs when women are viewed as inherently less capable, less logical, or less suited for positions of authority or technical expertise.

Jim's hesitation and surprise reveal a degrading assumption, the belief that women are not fit for high-level scientific work. His response suggests that complex mathematical calculations and aeronautical analysis are tasks naturally reserved for men. This assumption mirrors the gender norms of the 1960s, during which aeronautics and engineering in the United States were overwhelmingly male-dominated fields.

Although Jim later attempts to correct himself, his initial reaction exposes a deeply rooted stereotype: that women are emotional, weak, or intellectually inferior, and therefore unqualified for demanding scientific roles. This moment highlights how even seemingly casual comments can reinforce structural gender bias, positioning women like Katherine in undervalued or underestimated roles despite their expertise.

Education-based discrimination

Education-based discrimination faced by the main characters of *Hidden Figures* appears most clearly in Mary Jackson's attempt to enter NASA's Engineer Training Program. The dialogue below illustrates how Mary's application is denied based on newly imposed requirements:

VIVIAN MITCHELL: NASA doesn't commission females for the Engineer Training Program.

Mary ruffles up.

MARY: That position is open to any qualified applicant.

VIVIAN MITCHELL: Right. 'Cept you don't have the educational requirements

MAR: I have a Bachelors Degree in Mathematics and Physical Sciences. Same degree as most engineers around here

Vivian does not like to be challenged

VIVIAN MITCHELL: We now require advanced extension courses through the University of Virginia. It's in the Employee Handbook. An addendum.

She slides a copy onto the table.

VIVIAN MITCHELL (CONT'D): 'Case you haven't read it.

Mary can't control her frustration.

MARY: Every time we have a chance to get ahead, ya'll move the finish line. (*Hidden Figures*, 2016, p. 52)

Educational-based discrimination occurs when individuals are treated differently based on their level of education or access to educational resources (Ladd & Fiske, 2003, p. 45). In Mary's case, the new requirement that applicants must complete advanced extension courses at the University of Virginia appears to be a neutral policy. However, the neutrality is only superficial. Because the University of Virginia was an all-white institution at the time, Black applicants, especially Black women, were systematically excluded from accessing the courses necessary to qualify.

This makes the policy an example of indirect discrimination, which refers to rules or practices that seem fair on the surface but disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (Henson, 2016, p. 120). Although framed as a standard professional requirement, the new rule effectively blocks Mary from advancement due to racial segregation in educational institutions. Her statement, "Every time we have a chance to get ahead, ya'll move the finish line", captures how discriminatory structures continually shift expectations to maintain racial and gender hierarchies.

Thus, NASA's reliance on segregated educational pathways becomes a mechanism of exclusion, preventing qualified women of color like Mary from entering engineering roles despite possessing the same, or even higher, competence as her white male peers.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that *Hidden Figures* (2016) presents a clear and compelling depiction of the various forms of discrimination experienced by the three main characters such as Katherine Goble, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson. Through its portrayal of their professional and personal struggles, the movie demonstrates how racial, gender, and structural barriers shaped the experiences of women of color working in a segregated and male-dominated engineering environment.

The analysis shows that racial discrimination emerges as one of the most pervasive forms of inequality in the movie. This is reflected in the white policeman's immediate suspicion of Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary; in Dorothy's unfair treatment at work; and in the institutional segregation she encounters in the public library. These examples highlight how Black women were routinely denied equal access to public and professional spaces, reinforcing their marginalization. The study also identifies gender discrimination, particularly in the form of subordination, as experienced by Katherine. Her competence in aeronautics is repeatedly questioned, and she is subjected to assumptions that women are less capable of performing complex scientific work. Such moments reveal how gender bias restricted women's intellectual and professional recognition in STEM fields during the 1960s. Additionally, education-based discrimination becomes evident in Mary's attempt to join NASA's Engineer Training Program. Although framed as a neutral policy, the requirement to take extension courses at an all-white institution functionally excludes her and other Black women from advancement. This demonstrates how institutional barriers, often disguised as procedural standards, can disproportionately disadvantage marginalized groups.

Overall, the movie illustrates how overlapping forms of racial, gender, and structural discrimination shaped the opportunities available to women of color in engineering. By revealing these systemic barriers through narrative and character experience, *Hidden Figures* not only documents historical inequality but also encourages reflection on the persistent challenges that continue to affect diversity and inclusion in STEM professions today.

AUTHOR STATEMENT

Author 1: Conceptualization, Draft Writing, Methodology. Author 2: Supervision. Author 3: Reviewing and Editing. Author 4: Methodology Validation

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