



DOI: 10.19181/inter.2026.18.1.7  
EDN: UWODCK

## Informal Gender Discrimination in Male-dominated Industries: Hidden Barriers. A Case Study of a Female Railway Engineer in Russia<sup>1</sup>

### Ссылка для цитирования:

Bulchenko N. V. Informal Gender Discrimination in Male-Dominated Industries: Hidden Barriers. A Case Study of a Female Railway Engineer in Russia // Интеракция. Интервью. Интерпретация. 2026. Т. 18. № 1. С. 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.19181/inter.2026.18.1.7> EDN: UWODCK

### For citation:

Bulchenko N. V. (2026) Informal Gender Discrimination in Male-Dominated Industries: Hidden Barriers. A Case Study of a Female Railway Engineer in Russia. *Interaction. Interview. Interpretation*. Vol. 18. No. 1. P. 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.19181/inter.2026.18.1.7>



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*This article uses a case study of the first and only female railway engineer in the large northern region of contemporary Russia to examine informal gender discrimination in male-dominated industries. Despite the abolition of legal prohibitions in 2021, women remain severely underrepresented in locomotive crews due to informal barriers. Four in-depth interviews were conducted during three years to identify eight categories of informal gender discrimination. The barriers include informational deficits, financial burdens, 'male body standards' and 'male quotas', gender stereotypes and sexist prejudices against women, the time barrier, harassment and the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. All of them have no biological foundations and are fully socially constructed. These types of informal gender discrimination are specific for the northern provinces of Russia; the barriers in Moscow and other regions may differ for economic and life background reasons. The study highlights the need for robust institutional policies to dismantle these hidden barriers and promote gender equality in male-dominated industries.*

<sup>1</sup> This research is supported by the Faculty of Social Sciences, HSE University.

**Keywords:** informal economic discrimination; gender discrimination in the labour market; list of professions prohibited for women in Russia; women in men's economic fields; women in railroad industry in Russia

## Introduction

Many male-dominated industrial sectors (manufacturing, construction, energy, water supply, transportation) used to be legally or culturally off-limits to women until recent decades. Even after legal barriers have been removed, women may face informal discrimination in male-dominated fields [Begeny et al., 2020: 1]. Female professionals have their expertise and decisions questioned more often, which predicts higher burnout and lower intentions to stay [Williams et al., 2025: 5]. Women have uneven opportunities of career progression due to exclusion from social networking and the burden of domestic labour, which allows no overworking [Galea et al., 2019: 1221]. Female employees face microaggressions and harassment from male colleagues and customers on a daily basis and lack institutional protection measures against the belittling treatment [Foley, 2020: 1678]. All the above-mentioned issues produce an uncomfortable environment for women's employment; thus, informal barriers strengthen gender segregation in male-dominated industries.

The above-mentioned problem is highly relevant for Russia because of certain legal limitations for women's employment. The list of prohibited professions for women was reduced from 456 to 100 occupations in 2021, and more jobs in transportation and manufacturing are planned to be excluded from the list in 2027<sup>2</sup>. In 2021, women were allowed to be employed as railway engineers, or train drivers, and their technical assistants. Despite the fact that the legal barrier has been eliminated, there is no mass influx of women into now-permitted professions in spite of financial attractiveness and social bonuses, including early retirement. Thus, the purpose of the case study is to investigate daily work of women in the locomotive crews and identify the informal discriminatory barriers, which do not allow women to become railway engineers.

The method of an explanatory case-study [Yin, 2003: 4] is chosen because of the unique respondent — the first and only female railway engineer in the large northern region of contemporary Russia. Welch et al. distinguish four methods of theorising from case-studies [Welch et al., 2011: 740]. Their typology of theorising includes positivist inductive theory-building and natural experiment, along with post-positivist interpretive sensemaking and contextualised explanation. "Thick description" is crucial for the interpretative frameworks [Stake, 1995: 39, 40] and standpoint theory [Smith, 1974: 12, Harding, 1986: 136]. Human intentionality and agency are conditioned by existing social structures [Welch et al., 2011: 748], and thus the contextualised explanation of the chosen case study should be built

<sup>2</sup> Pravitelstvo utverdilo Nacionalnuyu model celevykh uslovij vedeniya biznesa [The Government Has Approved a National Model of Targeted Business Conditions]. *Pravitelstvo Rossii* [The Russian Government]. URL: <http://government.ru/docs/57130/> (accessed: 11 January 2026).



on historical and socio-economic context of the economic gender segregation in blue-collar occupations and railway engineering in particular. “Typical cases” can reveal multi-layered social mechanisms and can serve as a pathway to explanatory reconstruction of “total society” [Qu, 2020: 465]. The case study of the only female railway engineer in a large region cannot be typical due to the uniqueness of the respondent’s status. Nevertheless, the contextual explanation of “how” and “why” [Yin, 2003: 9] her daily work routines in the locomotive crew prevent other women from employment allows to categorize the barriers prior to further research within the field.

The following dimensions of the case study are taken into account: the contexts of time (three years after eliminating the legal restrictions), location (Russian province) and socioeconomic conditions (gender inequality in the post-Soviet Russia with its high engagement of women into the labour market). The explanatory case-study allows us to reveal the social issue by integrating objective external contextualization with the subjective internal interpretations of the social agent.

Firstly, I will give the context of international and Russian legal barriers, their historical background and modern state, and the socioeconomic impact of legal and informal gender discrimination on the labour market. Next, I will describe the methodology of the case-study of a female railway engineer in Russia, who is a unique respondent within the circumstances of her profession, being the only woman in the locomotive crew in a large Russian region for three years after legal barriers have been cancelled. After that, I will introduce the results of the analysis of four in-depth interviews conducted over three years, containing eight categories of informal gender discrimination, which prevent women from entering the railway engineer profession nowadays.

## **The Socioeconomic Impact of Legal Barriers for Women in the Labour Market: Historical Background and Modern Context**

### ***Gender Discrimination in the Labour Market: Legal Barriers***

Women’s increased participation in traditionally male-dominated professional fields is regarded as a step towards women’s empowerment and the achievement of gender equality. However, there are still many legal barriers for women’s employment in 86 countries over the world<sup>3</sup>, and women are not allowed to engage in specific occupations in at least 70 countries<sup>4</sup>.

The majority of developed countries currently follow the international anti-discrimination law and promote gender equality in the labour market. It is the result

<sup>3</sup> Many Governments Take Steps to Improve Women’s Economic Inclusion, Although Legal Barriers Remain Widespread. *World Bank Press Release*. 2018. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/03/29/many-governments-take-steps-to-improve-womens-economic-inclusion-although-legal-barriers-remain-widespread> (accessed: 10 January 2026).

<sup>4</sup> Social Institutions & Gender Index Dashboard. *OECD*. 2023. URL: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/social-institutions-gender-index.html> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

of the longstanding and ongoing evolution of international and national labour legislations aimed at reducing the exploitation of children in manufacturing industries through paternalistic protection of women's reproductive and children's health. Its final culmination was the achievement of workplace gender equality.

In 1935, the International Labour Organisation adopted the Underground Work (Women) Convention, prohibiting women's labour in mines<sup>5</sup>, which was the first international enactment on women's rights that protected women's reproductive health from harmful production factors in a patronizing way. The Convention lost its legal significance following the improvement of working conditions and the increased demand for women's labour during WWII. Nevertheless, some well-paid working professions in manufacturing industries are not available for women in at least 70 countries across the globe. Specifically, there are limitations in the construction industry in 37 countries, in the energy sector in 29 countries, in agriculture and farming in 27 countries, in water supply in 26 countries, and in transportation in 21 countries<sup>6</sup>. The legislation restricts a number of occupations for women in several post-Soviet countries as well, namely Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, Ukraine, Turkmenistan, and Russia. As for Russia, the Order issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, which was revised in 2021, prohibits one hundred professions for women<sup>7</sup>.

### **History of Legal Barriers for Women in Russia**

The Russian Federation has inherited the Soviet Union's complex background of social and legal policy of including and excluding women from the labour market. During the period of New Economic Policy (1922–1927), the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Labour Code of 1922 set certain limitations on women's labour to protect their reproductive health and maternity, and inter alia prohibited women's engagement in 'particularly heavy and harmful to health productions and underground work'<sup>8</sup>. This legal norm did not penalize women, but instead addressed the employers' policies [Bartenev, 2016: 38]. There was a further pronatalist turn in Joseph Stalin's social policy of the 1930-s with

<sup>5</sup> C045 — Underground Work (Women) Convention, 1935 (No. 45), Abrogated Convention — By decision of the International Labour Conference at its 112th Session. *International Labour Standards*. 2024. URL: [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx\\_en/f?p=1000:12100:7474451326179::NO::P12100\\_SHOW\\_TEXT:Y](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=1000:12100:7474451326179::NO::P12100_SHOW_TEXT:Y) (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>6</sup> Many Governments Take Steps to Improve Women's Economic Inclusion, Although Legal Barriers Remain Widespread. *World Bank Press Release*. 2018. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/03/29/many-governments-take-steps-to-improve-womens-economic-inclusion-although-legal-barriers-remain-widespread> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>7</sup> *Postanovlenie Pravitelstva RF ot 25 fevralia 2000 g. N 162 "Ob utverzhdenii perechnia tiazhelykh rabot i rabot s vrednymi ili opasnymi usloviiami truda, pri vypolnenii kotorykh zapreshchaetsia primenenie truda zhenshchin"* [Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 162 dated February 25, 2000 "On Approval of the List of Heavy Work and Work with Harmful or Dangerous Working Conditions, During Which the Use of Women's Labor is Prohibited]. URL: <https://base.garant.ru/181761/> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>8</sup> *Kodeks Zakonov o Trude RSFSR 1922 goda', prilozhenie iz uchebnogo posobiia I. Ia.Kiseleva "Trudovoe pravo Rossii"* (Moscow, 2001) [The RSFSR Labor Code Year 1922. Appendix from I. Ya.Kiselev's Textbook "Labor Law of Russia" (Moscow, 2001)]. URL: [https://www.hist.msu.ru/Labour/Law/kodex\\_22.htm](https://www.hist.msu.ru/Labour/Law/kodex_22.htm) (accessed: 11 January 2026).



adopting paternalistic legislation on protecting maternity, namely a Resolution 'Concerning the Upcoming Initiatives of the Party for the Engagement of Women Workers and Peasants in Its Activities' adopted in 1929. It restricted women's employment in heavy industries, underground work and during night shifts, and was accompanied by a list of banned occupations<sup>9</sup>. The Second World War cancelled the Resolution de-facto, since male jobs had to be replaced by women en masse. Women were involved in all professions with no exceptions, including the most heavy and harmful ones. The list of prohibited professions was no longer in effect [Baskakova, 2023: 141].

Zinaida Troitskaya was the first woman in the USSR and in the world to become a train driver. She entered the profession in 1935 and was promoted to administer the Circle Moscow Railroad between 1936 and 1942. As a role model, she came up with an initiative of engaging women into railway engineering within the Stakhanov movement in 1936. Following her example, 312,000 women joined Soviet Railways as locomotive engineers, railway mechanics and trainmasters by 1939 [Khasbulatova, 2013: 52].

In the midst of the postwar demographic crisis, after mass urbanization and an increase in divorce rate, a new prohibition list consisting of 456 professions was adopted in 1978 in the Soviet Union<sup>10</sup>. With some minor amendments introduced in 1987 and 1990, the prohibition list was adopted in the above-mentioned post-Soviet states [Shabalina, 2024: 260]. The Order of the Ministry of Labour of the Russian Federation "On adopting the list of industries, jobs and positions with harmful and (or) dangerous working conditions, in which the use of women's labour is limited" was considerably modified in 2021<sup>11</sup>. The list was reduced to one hundred occupations for 21 industries, including mining, metalworking, oil and gas production, shipping industry, aircraft and railway.

The modern trains and locomotives are no longer considered harmful or hazardous to drive, so women's reproductive health is no longer in danger.

<sup>9</sup> *Kommunisticheskaia partiia Sovetskogo Soiuzu v rezoliutsiiakh i resheniiakh sieezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TSK, 1898–1986: v 14 t. (Moscow, Politizdat, 4)* [The Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the Resolutions and Decisions of Congresses, Conferences, and Plenums of the Central Committee (1898–1986)]. URL: <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/425934-kommunisticheskaya-partiya-sovetskogo-soyuza-v-rezolyutsiyah-i-resheniyah-sezdov-konferentsiy-i-plenumov-tsk-1898-1986-t-14-1981-1984> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>10</sup> *Goskomtrud SSSR ot 25 iulia 1978 goda N 240 Prezidium VTSSPS ot 25 iulia 1978 goda N P10–3 POSTANOVLENIE "Ob utverzhdenii spiska proizvodstv, professii i rabot s tiazhelymi i vrednymi usloviiami truda, na kotorykh zapreshchaetsia primenenie truda zhenshchin" (s izmeneniami na 22 oktiabria 1990 goda)* [On Approval of the List of Industries, Professions and Jobs with Harsh and Harmful Working Conditions Where the Use of Women's Labor is Prohibited (As Amended on October 22, 1990)]. URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/9039453> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>11</sup> *Prikaz Ministerstva truda i sotsialnoi zashchity Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 13 maia 2021 g. № 313n 'O vnesenii izmenenii v prikaz Ministerstva truda i sotsialnoi zashchity Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 18 iulia 2019 g. № 512n "Ob utverzhdenii perechnia proizvodstv, rabot i dolzhnostei s vrednymi i (ili) opasnymi usloviiami truda, na kotorykh ogranichivaetsia primenenie truda zhenshchin"* [Order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Russian Federation No. 313n dated May 13, 2021 "On Amendments to Order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Russian Federation No. 512n dated July 18, 2019 "On Approval of the List of Industries, Jobs and Positions with Harmful and (or) Dangerous Working Conditions Where the Use of Women's Labor is Restricted"]. *Garant* [Garant]. URL: <https://base.garant.ru/401565920/> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

In the summer of 2020, the first woman in contemporary Russia received a diploma of locomotive engineer. In 2021, the first train driver assistant was employed in the city of Ufa in the Bashkir Region. In 2022, the first railway engineer started driving a train at the Moscow railroad. In the summer of 2022, the first long-distance train driver entered the Sverdlov railroad. In the spring of 2023, the female locomotive engineer was engaged in the first international route<sup>12</sup>.

Currently, 378 women are employed by the Russian Railways as locomotive engineers and their assistants, including 293 in the Traction Directorate, 76 in the Central Directorate of motor-wagons rolling stock, and nine in the Directorate of High-Speed communication. This figure comprises 0,3% of all train drivers and their assistants in Russia<sup>13</sup>. To compare, there are 125,622 male train drivers and assistants employed by the Russian Railways [Shabalina, 2024: 260]. To become a railway engineer, one needs to go through six-months education to obtain the profession of the railway engineer assistant first. No additional technical education is required; school education is enough to start a train driver course. Training depots are located in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg, depending on the type of the train. Further, the employee needs to have at least one-year experience of working as a locomotive driver assistant. After that, the assistant can take a six-months or four-months education course to become a railway engineer, and spend several months practicing before the official appointment. During the first year, the railway engineer has to work with a more experienced colleague in the role of the assistant. Early retirement, vouchers to health resorts for the whole family, medical care, free train travel, child and maternity social benefits, the salary considerably higher than the median in the region, as well as the stable work for a state-owned company can be rather attractive for both male and female employees<sup>14</sup>.

### **Negative Social and Economic Impact of Legal Barriers on Women's Employment**

Cancelling the list of professions prohibited for women is one of the key issues of the feminist agenda in Russia. It is important for women to achieve a complete cancellation of the list, because besides evident legal discrimination, it has a negative socio-economic impact.

Firstly, the list of prohibited professions blocks women's access to a number of educational institutions. It is impossible to be hired to a managerial position without working experience in some industries. Hence, women can neither obtain industry-specific education, nor get a promotion within the industry, which amplifies horizontal segregation and the gender pay gap.

<sup>12</sup> *Vpervye v istorii rossiiskikh zheleznykh dorog zhenshchina stala mashinistom mezhdunarodnogo passazhirskogo poezda, RZHD* [For the First Time in the History of Russian Railways, A Woman Became the Driver of an International Passenger Train]. *RZhd* [RZD (Russian Railroads) Official Website]. 2023. URL: <https://www.rzd.ru/ru/9284/page/3102?id=283639> (accessed: 11 January 2026)

<sup>13</sup> V RZHD zhenshchin tseniat [Russian Railways Values Women]. *Gudok* [Gudok]. 2025. URL: <https://www.gudok.ru/newspaper/?ID=1698142> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>14</sup> Sotsialnaya podderzhka [Social Support]. *RZhd* [RZD (Russian Railroads) Official Website]. 2024. URL: <https://sr2023.rzd.ru/ru/social-aspect/social-personnel-policy/social-support> (accessed: 21 February 2026).



Secondly, women can still work in harmful industries on less-paid jobs, or be hired to a prohibited profession without an official employment. Thus, they receive the harm to health as men do, but they do not receive social benefits, such as additional payments for harmful working conditions, longer vacation, and early retirement with higher pensions.

Thirdly, the lack of competition can reduce the working qualifications of men and the quality of work performed. The influx of women into men's occupational fields can improve the quality of work through a more attentive approach to work, shaped by women's gender socialization, and through competition and meritocracy.

Fourth, the ban on certain professions for women in mono-resource towns is another factor in women's exclusion from the labour market and, as a result, the feminization of poverty [Christopherson et al., 2022: 12]. This, in turn, increases the risk of being subjected to domestic violence and involved into prostitution<sup>15</sup>.

Finally, the government and legislative discourse denies women's agency and contributes to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes, purposefully ousting women from the labour market and portraying them majorly in maternal roles. The new "National Strategy of Action for Women of the Russian Federation until 2030" declares engaging women into the labour market<sup>16</sup>. However, no specific measures have been implemented within the area of the labour market with a high potential of hiring women.

### ***Informal Gender Discrimination in the Labour Market: Hidden Barriers***

Both legal and informal barriers prevent women from succeeding in male-dominated fields. Informal barriers are difficult to detect and to measure, unlike gender pay gaps or other financial metrics. For example, a "sticky floor" [Yap, Konrad, 2009: 595], whereby women tend to remain in low-ranking positions and have to wait longer before promotion compared to their male counterparts. A 'broken rung' describes a challenge where men are significantly more likely to advance to senior roles, whereas women often encounter barriers at the initial stages of career progression. Specifically, for every 100 men in the United States, only 87 white women and 82 women of color are promoted to the next level<sup>17</sup>. Next, the "corporate pipeline" [Viviers, Mans-Kemp, 2017: 90] visually represents the progression of women and people of color within organisations from entry-level roles to managerial positions. Further, the types of informal discrimination which use various glass metaphors in their names, e.g. the glass ceiling effect,

<sup>15</sup> *Prostitution and Violence against Women and Girls* (Geneva, World Health Organization). 2024. URL: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/48> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>16</sup> *Rasporiazhenie Pravitelstva RF ot 29.12.2022 N 4356-r "Ob utverzhdanii Natsionalnoi strategii deistvii v interesakh zhenshchin na 2023–2030 gody"* [Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation No. 4356-r dated December 29, 2022 "On approval of the National Strategy of Action for Women for 2023–2030"]. URL: [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_436691/0ab1d11f34aa37bd186ca7948792439bf4b2d4c1/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_436691/0ab1d11f34aa37bd186ca7948792439bf4b2d4c1/) (accessed: 11 January 2026).

<sup>17</sup> *Women in the Workplace Report*. McKinsey. 2022. URL: <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/diversity%20and%20inclusion/women%20in%20the%20workplace%202022/women-in-the-workplace-2022.pdf> (accessed: 11 January 2026).

is a gender imbalance in top management [Cotter et al., 2001: 656]. The glass walls effect indicates gender horizontal segregation [Miller et al., 1999: 224], precisely underrepresentation or overrepresentation of women in certain occupations. The glass cliff effect stands for the precarious nature of women's work in management [Ryan, Haslam, 2005: 81], while the glass elevator indicates higher positions occupied by men in stereotypically women fields.

When formal barriers are abolished, it is nevertheless difficult for women to enter the labour market. After the abolition of legal barriers for women, informal gender discriminatory barriers, including those specific for the industry, region and local culture persist to remain. Informal barriers mean situations, events, mechanisms, or phenomena that do not affect men's careers, but hinder women's careers, and thus men gain an advantage over women in the labour market. To identify informal barriers which prevent women from making careers in formerly prohibited professions, I use a case study of a female Russian railway engineer, or a train driver<sup>18</sup>. Four years after the removal of the ban on this profession for women, she is still the only railway engineer employed in the large northern region of Russia.

## **A Case Study of a Female Railway Engineer in Russia**

### ***Design***

To identify informal gender barriers in the profession of a railway engineer, I chose a biographical method, namely an in-depth interview with a woman, who used to work as a train driver assistant for three years and became the train driver after. She has been working for the Railway in a large northern region since 2021. The interviewee is a unique respondent within the circumstances of her profession. She became the first train driver assistant in the large northern region and remained the only woman in the locomotive crew for three years. Now, she is the first woman to become a railway engineer in her region.

The interviewee is 38 years old. She is not married, and has no children. Four in-depth interviews were conducted (4th of April and 18th of April, 2023; 1st of July, 2024 and 3rd of May, 2025) within the span of three years. The interviewee took a job during the Covid crisis after a layoff at her previous job and after a long and fruitless job search. The respondent's emancipated views and her interest in the feminist agenda, because of which she has critically assessed the situations of everyday life at work through a gendered lens, have enriched the narrative interview greatly despite her subjectivity [Rozhdestvenskaya, 2012: 95]. In addition, the reliance on the standpoint theory or epistemology [Smith, 1974: 12; Harding, 1986: 136], according to which an individual's socio-political experience shapes her perspective, minimized the patriarchal distortions in the intersubjective knowledge derived from her interviews.

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<sup>18</sup> I use both "train driver" or "locomotive driver" (the American tradition) and "railway engineer" or "locomotive engineer" (the British tradition) for indicating the profession. These terms have the same meaning and are interchangeable.



To identify and classify informal gender discriminatory barriers or types of informal discrimination, the ‘categorization of meanings’ approach [Kvale, 1996: 195] was applied. The categories were outlined during the interview process and then identified, coded with colors, further labeled and finally categorized during the analysis of the interview transcript. Additionally, the narrative method of Fritz Schütze [Schütze, 1984: 19] was used. Since the purpose of the analysis is to typify specific discriminatory barriers for women in male working professions, the narrative analysis was applied as a secondary method to examine the informant’s career path.

According to Fritz Schütze’s typology of biographical processes [Schütze, 1984: 82], the presentation of the respondent’s life experience corresponds most of all to the biographical action scheme, or the biography as a strategy, which is centered on the self-made person and her rational and progressive movement towards the goal. The respondent’s career path is full of institutional obstacles at nearly every stage, full of meetings with “helpers” and “villains”, including fighting the system and defeating it. The interview begins with setting her next career goal, upon the achievement of which the next two years will be revised: *“That’s right, I will become a railway engineer. And what’s more, I have already been sent to receive education”*. Three years later, the interview is focused on the potential barriers that might be encountered in her newly acquired profession.

The biographical trajectory of the informant’s career can be schematized as follows: “A dismissal during the covid crisis; job search; applying for a job at the Russian Railways; registration and training for another job at the Employment Center; urgent selection for railway engineer assistant; medical examination and flight to Moscow; study and examinations; medical examination; rejection; second decision of the medical examination; employment as a railway engineer assistant; study for a railway engineer; and mastering a new profession of the railway engineer”.

## Results

### ***The Types of Informal Discrimination Against Women in the Male Working Professions***

The twelve categories of informal barriers are described on the basis of the respondent’s three years employment as an assistant to locomotive engineer, and several more barriers have been added to these categories as the examples of the barriers experienced after her promotion. The uniqueness of the respondent’s status makes the purposeful sampling absolutely extreme, while the sensitivity of the field makes it hard to recruit more respondents. Another life background and specific local conditions may result in different barriers.

#### *1. Informational deficits*

To begin with, women can face an information barrier as there are no advertisements on employment opportunities for women, no gender marking in job titles, and no pictures of females in the railway uniforms in the ads. No specific PR-campaigns on informing women about new available professions

are held by Russian Railways. The interviewee reports that she was not offered the vacancy of a railway engineer assistant at the public employment service. Eventually, she learned about the job from her friend's post on a social network.

### *2. Financial burdens*

The next group of informal barriers can be described as "financial barriers", particularly the costs of tuition, medical fees and the wage gap. There are three training centers of locomotive engineering in Russia, namely Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg. In order to gain the new profession, the respondent had to prepay for the travel and accommodation in Moscow, where she was trained to drive the train models which shuttle in her region. This turned out to be a rather difficult undertaking for a single woman, who lost her job during the Covid pandemic. Additionally, the respondent had to pay partly for the advanced medical examination in a private hospital, though the examination is free for future railway employees. This happened because doctors were afraid to take responsibility for the first woman in their practice with her 'deviation from the norm', meaning the male standard of health indicators. She also had to fit her railway uniform at her own expense, which was quite expensive for her, because no small women's sizes are available in the company. The tuition is free and future train operators have a scholarship matching the minimum wage of the region of their origin, which is significantly smaller than those for Moscow locals. Hence, women who need this job most have fewer financial opportunities to get it.

It is also instructive to point out that being the only woman among thousands of locomotive engineers and their assistants, the respondent discovered that she had a 30% gender pay gap compared to her male colleagues.

At work, the respondent was faced with the fact that no men wanted to work with her during her partner's vacation. As a result, she lost part of her salary. Moreover, no similar positions were available for women in locomotive depots, which was the only alternative place of work available for train drivers. Traditionally, there was a glass door for women in traction maintenance depots, although the legal ban for hiring women had been lifted. This undoubtedly reinforced women's financial vulnerability in the occupation.

### *3. The "male body medical standards"*

The third barrier, already mentioned above, was the 'male body standard' at the medical examination. The respondent says that doctors had prejudices against females, and thus asked her to provide her five years medical record, required a series of advanced medical tests, and finally refused to approve her candidacy for work. After all, the doctors had to allow her to be hired, but it is important to point out that this happened on orders from above.

### *4. "Male quotas"*

The fourth type of informal gender discrimination can be referred to as "male quotas". Men were assisted by the tutors in order to pass the tests during the training, had help in the process of employment, and their minor mistakes



were ignored at work. The respondent revealed how a psychologist specifically instructed men during testing on how they felt and what character traits they were supposed to have. The psychologists also helped male applicants to solve attention tests, which are critically important in the train driver's assistant profession. The respondent mentions train engineers complaining about their male assistants' incompetence at work, which was usually overlooked.

### 5. Gender stereotypes and sexist prejudices against women

The fifth type of informal discrimination refers to prescriptive and descriptive gender stereotypes. Shifts started at 2 a.m., and the respondent was required to come to work at night in full make up. She tells about a training course for women, where female employees were instructed how to apply make-up and create the "babetta" hair style:

*"I asked them if men had such training. I said, men don't need to apply make-up every time! (...) I am a person, I am not some kind of a doll, I will not turn myself into some kind of doll! I don't have that kind of job, I'm not even a conductor on passenger trains, I do not work with people, I work with the train. Yes, I do my rounds on the train. Yes, the passengers can see me, so what? I'm working at that moment. I'm not working with them; I'm still working with the train."*

Descriptive gender stereotypes, or 'our internal stereotypes', as the informant notes, include night work schedules, long business trips, "dirty" work, which are 'not for women'.

*"Women don't want to leave homes for long, considering the fact that some of their husbands did not behave very well in the past"*

The barrier of sexism and prejudices against women is connected to being the only woman in a male team. It is the masculine and sexist barrier, which implies a hard psychological burden onto women. Women hardly would want to work in an uncomfortable male-dominated psychological environment:

*"Since I am now in the thick of this team, then yes, many very dark sides have been revealed to me, sometimes really dark, which are not even worth talking about"*

The interviewee talks about a great number of manifestations of sexism on behalf of men. Many do not want to work with her because she is a woman, despite the fact that working with her has a serious bonus in the form of being awarded a separate room in the hotel. They agree to work with non-competent men and with newcomers, but never with a woman. When the respondent used to work as an assistant to the railway engineer, male employees often asked the respondent's working partner why he did not ask her to have a vacation simultaneously with him, so that none of their colleagues would have to share a locomotive crew with her. The respondent also mentioned the "hepeating" [McClellan, 2018: 39] situations,

when she is not believed by her male colleagues to know the source of the train's malfunction. She is also afraid to 'let down all women' by making a mistake, because of the gender stereotype which says that all women are judged by one woman's mistake. In addition to male colleagues' everyday sexism, passengers can be rude and misogynistic as well, and railroad workers often shout 'a woman is driving'. The respondent describes an episode when a new trainee was hired to a locomotive engineer assistant position:

*"...a new female trainee arrived. And she made a big fuss, just like I did back in the day. Nothing has changed. You see, for two years, apparently, they might have gotten used to me purely as a person, not to the fact I was a woman. Because when she arrived, they were after her. Everybody wanted to see her. Everybody asked me about her. I said, 'You scared the woman! How are you behaving!' I said, 'You're behaving like Bandar-logs, not like people!' 'Oh, we have an interest', they replied. I said, you are supposed to show your interest in a respectful way, not like this, not like you did to me back in the day. Even though I probably never would have thought of hiding. I went to the briefings, stood there with everyone else, and of course I was attacked. When I first came to do a practical course, you can't imagine how many times I heard that this is not a woman's profession, that women shouldn't come here — they actually said it to my face."*

### 6. Harassment

Harassment in male-dominated settings is widely documented as a mechanism that produces and maintains gender inequality rather than a series of isolated interpersonal conflicts [O'Connor et al. 2021: 3]. Sex-based harassment is interpreted as status protection in a gender hierarchy: men harass those who blur gender boundaries or threaten male status. Sexual harassment is more prevalent in male-dominated workplaces and industries, with women in traditionally masculine jobs especially at risk. Harassment is viewed as an exclusionary gatekeeping tool [Zhu, Wang, 2023: 65] and can be simply dangerous for a woman trapped with a male colleague in a confined space of a train cabin. Women are particularly vulnerable in male-dominated blue-collar professions, where migrants, indigenous women or women from poorer regions are often employed<sup>19</sup>. There is no legal protection of women against harassment at the workplace in Russia [Miryasova, 2020: 200]. The respondent says men often touch her, and it is unpleasant and psychologically difficult to tolerate:

*"...talking about cases of violation of my bodily autonomy... they did not just happen; poked me in the thigh with his finger at the clinic. Yeah, and it happens almost all the time. I mean, they don't poke each other, right, they don't hug each other? But they do that to me!"*

<sup>19</sup> About the Sexual Harassment Awareness Reporting Engagement (SHare) Campaign. *WorkSafe*. 2024. URL: <https://www.worksafe.wa.gov.au/about-sexual-harassment-awareness-reporting-engagement-share-campaign> (accessed: 11 January 2026).



### 7. The time barrier

The seventh type of informal discrimination, which belongs to the “pull down” group, is the time barrier. Feminist theorists argue that women are structurally alienated from their own time, expected to devote it to others at home and at work [Bryson, 2007: 106]. Even in highly egalitarian contexts, men report more agency over time, while women experience fragmented time and higher stress balancing work and care [Staub, Rafnsdóttir, 2019: 157]. Working in a locomotive crew demands considerable time costs, including long shifts, night shifts, and sometimes spontaneous scheduling of extra shifts. This kind of labor organisation makes it a barrier for family women. In addition, the time barrier unites several gender-specific dimensions.

First of all, it is the mandatory participation of the respondent in all public corporate events, since she is a unique employee because of her gender. In fact, it turns into a large amount of unpaid overtime. She complains about wasting the non-sustainable resource of her personal time:

*“There’s a huge problem here, of course, when I’m called for a meeting urgently! And I have the only day off, for example. I have to drive there, sit there, and drive back home for at least three hours. (...) But I have to go anyway. Because I’m the only one, I am noticeable!”*

Secondly, it is unpaid domestic labour, which traditionally falls on women. Russian families usually combine high female employment with strongly gendered divisions of unpaid work. Post-Soviet Russia shows multiple gender contracts beyond the Soviet ‘working mother’ model, including career-oriented woman, a housewife with a male breadwinner, and a sponsored woman, each implying distinct divisions of unpaid labor and power in the family [Ukhova, 2021: 3250; Savinskaya, 2024: 270]. In small-town “potential middle class” and manual-worker families, contracts are strongly traditional: housework and childcare are seen as “naturally” women’s responsibility, with little negotiation [Lipasova, 2017: 633]. In provincial towns, three fatherhood models dominate. These models are “absent”, “situational”, and “involved”, but even “involved” fathers often frame care as secondary to breadwinning and see routine domestic work as maternal duty [Lipasova, 2017: 640; Rebrey, 2023: 55]. The respondent admits that men have a huge advantage here, because the blue-collars are hardly involved in unpaid care and domestic labour and expect to receive full household services from their spouses within the local traditional gender contract. It is a male privilege to focus on productive work, not to get tired of unpaid work and not to carry the ‘mental burden’ of micromanaging household chores. The respondent complains that she has to manage her second shift on her own unlike her male colleagues, whose wives clean and iron their uniforms, prepare lunchboxes and provide the rest time for their partners.

*“...when I’m called for a meeting after work hours, I keep saying to my managers: you should understand, my colleagues have a free maid called ‘wife’. (...) I don’t have such a bonus, I don’t have this privilege! I do everything by myself, I have*

*to cook for myself, do my own laundry, iron my own clothes, and do my own household chores. I believe that men, of course, have the greatest privileges of this kind, unlike us.*

*All the railway engineers I work with, they don't do much around the house, because "he's a railway engineer!" He has a very hard job, very demanding, with an early burnout. There's always a woman doing everything for him. (...) That is, his wife does everything, he only drives the train. He has no other problems in his life."*

#### *8. A self-fulfilling prophecy*

The final category of informal gender discrimination, which summarizes all the previous ones, can be called a self-fulfilling prophecy [Merton, 1948: 193]. There are so many barriers for women in this field because there are very few female employees. As a result, it becomes a vicious circle, or a self-replicating system. The respondent made this point herself:

*"I think that there must be some kind of recognition that women can also work in this profession. But this will occur only when there are at least 20–30 percent of women in the workforce. Even when my trainee starts her job in summer, well, if she does, the two of us will not change this situation either, we will not break it, we need (...) to have both female assistants and railway engineers. Therefore, of course, I will definitely study [for a railway engineer position]. (...) That is, when I will not be the only one there, but when there will be at least 10 or 20 percent of us ... then, perhaps, others will be more willing to go [the railway]."*

When she was promoted to the position of a railway engineer after six-month studies in Moscow, the interviewee faced several more barriers, which add new categories to the ones mentioned above. First of all, there is a risk that no male assistant will want to choose her as a crew partner, and she will lose her salary because of the absence of working shifts. Moreover, since she is a manager now, the male assistants may not follow her instructions, because that would be shameful for them "to obey a woman". Next, there is a passengers' and common people bias against a woman driving a locomotive, and once more the respondent is afraid to fail and let down all women, because women are judged tougher than men. Though she realises that many of her male colleagues are not promoted to railway engineers because they do not want to or they are not competent enough, she admits that the new profession implies a huge responsibility for her, because hiring more women depends on her perfect job record.

To sum up, all of the above-mentioned barriers prevent women from entering the profession where legal barriers have been abolished. All the informal barriers can be eliminated "from above" by institutional measures, state legislation or the company's affirmative action. There are no biological barriers in the profession for women. As the respondent notes:



*“An old train driver said to me just the other day: ‘a train driver’s assistant is a profession for women.’ (...) there are no difficulties really, at all. (...) When I started working, I weighed 46 kilograms. Well, physically, you can imagine that I am not the strongest woman in the world... a brake shoe weighs, well, seven kilograms. The maximum that it will be necessary to carry is three at a time and not for a long distance. Well, I think, 200 meters, no more. There are lightweight ones now, one and a half kilograms. Well, we don’t have these ones at our depot, but there are some at the stations where we sometimes park.”*

## Conclusion

As a result of the analysis of four in-depth interviews conducted within three years, eight categories of informal gender barriers, or types of informal discrimination in the male-dominated field of locomotive engineering in the Russian Railways company were identified. These include informational deficits, financial burdens, “male body standards” and “male quotas”, gender stereotypes and sexist prejudices against women, the time barrier, harassment and the “self-fulfilling prophecy”. The informal barriers are specific for the provinces of Russia; the barriers in Moscow and other regions may differ for economic and other reasons. All the barriers have no biological foundations and are fully socially constructed. Strong institutional measures are required to overcome informal barriers and to engage women back into locomotive crews.

The list of prohibited professions in Russia illustrates how difficult it is to cancel the ban on professions and to engage women in male-dominated fields again. It took about 40 years to overrule the formal prohibition and there is a need in structural social policies to eliminate informal barriers and to get women back into formerly prohibited jobs. After more than three years, the respondent is the only assistant to locomotive engineer in a large region. In addition, only four female railway engineer assistants were hired after 2023. Steinar Kvale notes the tendency, especially in feminist research, to use the knowledge gained from the interviews to bring social changes under study [Kvale, 1996: 245]. The article contributes to further research in formerly prohibited female professions in order to facilitate practical changes within the railway sector to remove informal discriminative barriers and bring more women into Russia’s locomotive crews for diversity and better performance.

## Limitations

There used to be only 35 women in Russia’s locomotive crews in 2023, when the respondent was interviewed for the first time. One respondent is an absolutely extreme example of purposeful sampling, but can be enough to start investigation into the topic with no sociological research background, especially when possessing

unique features [Palinkas, 2015: 2]. The respondent is literally unique in the profession of locomotive engineer in the large northern region of Russia. Because of the small number of female railway engineers, these women are under a lot of scrutiny exerted by the management, media, and society. That is the reason why women are at risk to be dismissed or sued for slander because of not perfectly precise assertions, and it is hardly possible to find more female respondents, which makes it a sensitive field for a researcher. Moreover, other respondents' life backgrounds and local conditions may differ significantly, which can impact the results crucially.

There might be some other informal barriers at Moscow Railroads. There are plenty of vacancies for women in the labour market in the prosperous capital of Russia, as well as more women involved in railway driving. The eight informal barriers mentioned above refer to the Russian province, not the capital.

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**Received:** 15.01.2026

**Accepted:** 18.03.2026



**Неформальная гендерная дискриминация в мужских рабочих профессиях: скрытые барьеры. Кейс-стади помощницы машиниста электропоезда в России<sup>20</sup>.**

DOI: [10.19181/inter.2026.18.1.7](https://doi.org/10.19181/inter.2026.18.1.7)

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Статья посвящена неформальной гендерной дискриминации в ранее запрещенных для женщин профессиях. Несмотря на исключение профессий помощницы машиниста и машинистки поезда из списка запрещенных профессий в 2021 году, женщины по-прежнему экстремально недопредставлены в локомотивных бригадах российских

<sup>20</sup> Исследование реализовано при поддержке факультета социальных наук, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики».



железных дорог: трудоустройство женщин на эти должности составляет единичные случаи на фоне десятков тысяч мужчин. Целью объяснительного кейс-стади стало выявление неформальных барьеров, препятствующих массовому притоку женщин в профессии помощницы машиниста и машинистки электропоезда. Проведенные в течение трех лет четыре глубинных интервью о повседневности рабочих будней с уникальной респонденткой — единственной женщиной, работающей помощницей машиниста электропоезда в одном из регионов России — позволили определить восемь категорий неформальной гендерной дискриминации, включая дефицит информации о трудоустройстве, финансовые затраты и разрывы, «мужской» медицинский стандарт, «мужские квоты», гендерные стереотипы и сексистские предрассудки о женщинах, домогательства, потерю личного времени и «самоисполняющееся пророчество». Все неформальные барьеры не связаны с биологией женского пола; они социально сконструированы; для их устранения требуются институциональные меры. Неформальные экономические барьеры, выявленные в кейс-стади, специфичны для провинций современной России; барьеры в Москве могут отличаться по экономическим причинам. В статье также прослеживается историческое развитие международного и отечественного права в области трудовых запретов для женщин и обсуждается современное влияние легальных барьеров на женский рынок труда, в частности, ограничение доступа к образованию и целым секторам отраслей экономики, феминизация бедности и усиление гендерных стереотипов о слабости женщин и единственно приемлемой материнской роли для самореализации. Исследование подчеркивает необходимость эффективной институциональной политики для устранения скрытых барьеров и содействия гендерному равенству в отраслях, где доминируют мужчины.

**Ключевые слова:** неформальная экономическая дискриминация; гендерная дискриминация на рынке труда; список запрещенных для женщин профессий в России; женщины в мужских сферах труда; женщины на железных дорогах в России

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**Статья поступила в редакцию:** 15.01.2026

**Принята к публикации:** 18.03.2026

ВАК: 5.4.4.