

**Beyond Title VII: Benchmarking Gender-Based
Workplace Protections in North Carolina and the
Southeast**

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WomenNC Partnership

WomenNC is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering the next generation of leaders to advance gender equality in North Carolina. Through its Scholars Program, the organization supports university students in conducting policy-focused research on gender disparities, equipping them with the tools to develop recommendations and advocate for legislative and workplace reforms (WomenNC, n.d.). Scholars selected for this initiative come from institutions such as UNC-Chapel Hill, Duke University, and NC State University, demonstrating WomenNC’s commitment to fostering research-based advocacy among emerging professionals.

In 2018, WomenNC partnered with RTI International’s Global Gender Center to expand its leadership development model. Under the guidance of Dr. Wendee Wechsberg, the collaboration introduced “femtors”—a term denoting female mentors—who provide individualized support to scholars as they design research projects on gender-based inequities and policy solutions (WomenNC, n.d.). Beyond academia, WomenNC has spearheaded community engagement efforts, including research reports on the status of women in North Carolina, policy recommendations to state and local officials, and educational panels on critical issues such as voting rights and reproductive healthcare access (WomenNC, n.d.).

WomenNC operates through four key initiatives, each designed to advance gender equity through research, education, and policy advocacy:

1. Scholars Program

This leadership development program selects university students to conduct research on gender disparities within local communities. Scholars receive training in advocacy, research methodologies, and public speaking, culminating in presentations of their findings to local policymakers and international forums such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (WomenNC, n.d.).

2. Community Education

Through initiatives like the “Critical Conversations” series, WomenNC educates the public on pressing gender-related issues. These events feature expert panel discussions on topics such as sexual assault, human trafficking, and reproductive healthcare access, equipping attendees with resources and actionable steps to advance gender equity (WomenNC, n.d.).

3. Cities for CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)

WomenNC leads the Cities for CEDAW campaign in North Carolina, advocating for local governments to adopt gender-equity policies. These efforts have led to Durham County and the City of Durham passing CEDAW resolutions, which establish mechanisms to evaluate and address gender disparities in local programs and budgets (WomenNC, n.d.).

4. UNC Public Policy Collaboration

In partnership with the University of North Carolina’s Public Policy department, WomenNC engages students in gender policy research that informs legislative action. These collaborations have resulted in comprehensive reports and policy recommendations on critical issues such as human trafficking and intimate partner violence (WomenNC, n.d.).

This project outlines collaborative work with WomenNC’s new Executive Director, Danielle Watson-Goetz, to apply research to real-world policy and advocacy efforts. This collaboration provided the opportunity to learn from her expertise in nonprofit leadership, strategic planning, and gender equity initiatives. The project focused on analyzing North Carolina’s workplace discrimination laws and industry-specific policies to assess how effectively they protect individuals from gender-based discrimination. Through this research, the focus centered on the identification of legal gaps and the proposal of policy solutions that align with WomenNC’s mission to advocate for stronger workplace protections.

Through its research, advocacy, and public engagement initiatives, WomenNC continues to serve as a catalyst for advancing gender equality in North Carolina (WomenNC, n.d.).

Policy Question

How does North Carolina’s legal framework for addressing gender-based workplace discrimination compare to neighboring states—Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina—in terms of statutory protections and reported EEOC complaint trends?

Based on this comparative analysis, where does North Carolina stand within the broader regional landscape of gender discrimination protections, and what targeted policy strategies could help close identified gaps?

This research analyzes publicly reported EEOC charge data from 2009 to 2024 alongside a comparative review of gender-based discrimination laws in North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina. By examining both the frequency and share of sex-based EEOC complaints, and the statutory frameworks that either support or fail to support complainants, this project identifies key gaps in North Carolina’s legal protections relative to its regional peers.

Background

To evaluate where North Carolina stands in the broader landscape of protections against gender-based workplace discrimination, it is necessary to examine both the state’s legal framework and trends in how individuals seek recourse through existing systems. While federal law provides a foundational baseline of workplace protections, state-level policies vary significantly in scope and strength. In North Carolina, limited statutory protections prompt many individuals to rely on federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), which processes discrimination complaints that might otherwise be addressed at the state level in jurisdictions with stronger laws.

At the federal level, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin for employers with 15 or more employees (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], n.d.). These protections are extended through the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 and clarified in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), where the Supreme Court held that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is a form of sex discrimination (Supreme Court of the United States, 2020). The Equal Pay Act of 1963 further requires equal pay for equal work regardless of gender (EEOC, n.d.). While these federal laws offer important safeguards, the processes involved in filing with the EEOC—such as long investigation timelines, limited remedies, and procedural complexity—can be difficult to navigate, particularly for marginalized groups (National Women’s Law Center, 2023; American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2021).

North Carolina’s state-level framework provides fewer tools for individuals to address discrimination directly. The North Carolina Equal Employment Practices Act (NCEEPA) articulates a broad public policy against employment discrimination based on race, religion, color, national origin, age, sex, or disability (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 143-422.2). However, unlike stronger anti-discrimination statutes in states such as Virginia, the NCEEPA does not establish a private right of action. This means that individuals cannot sue employers under state law for violations, nor does North Carolina have standalone protections related to sexual harassment, pregnancy accommodations, or retaliation beyond what is provided at the federal level (Smith Anderson, n.d.; National Women’s Law Center, 2023; Movement Advancement Project, 2024). These gaps make North Carolina an outlier in the Southeast when it comes to comprehensive workplace protections.

To explore how these legal differences may influence patterns in reporting and access to redress, this research project uses EEOC charge data as a comparative indicator. Between 2009 and 2024, North Carolina consistently had a higher number and percentage of sex-based discrimination complaints submitted to the EEOC than its neighboring states—Tennessee, South Carolina, and Virginia. While this data does not reflect case outcomes or enforcement effectiveness, it does serve as a useful proxy for understanding how often individuals in each state turn to federal channels to address workplace gender discrimination. When considered alongside each state’s legal framework, these complaint patterns can help identify structural policy gaps that may shape employee behavior and workplace conditions.

Broader socioeconomic dynamics further compound the limitations of North Carolina’s legal protections. In 2022, women in North Carolina earned just 85.7% of the median weekly earnings of men and were overrepresented in low-wage occupations such as food service, retail, and caregiving (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2022; North Carolina Justice Center, 2022). Women working in male-dominated fields report higher rates of workplace harassment, and transgender workers in the state face disproportionate mistreatment, job insecurity, and discrimination based on gender identity (Pew Research Center, 2018; National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015). These realities point to a persistent gap between legal rhetoric and lived experience.

This project uses EEOC data and comparative legal analysis not to measure enforcement outcomes, but to benchmark where North Carolina stands relative to its regional peers in terms of legal coverage and employee-reported experiences. By analyzing trends in sex-based complaints and mapping statutory protections across North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina, this research aims to identify the policy levers available to close the protection gap.

Problem Statement

Gender-based workplace discrimination remains a significant and persistent problem in North Carolina, particularly in industries where women and gender minorities are underrepresented. Despite comprising nearly half of the state’s labor force, women in North Carolina continue to experience systemic inequities—including wage disparities, occupational segregation, and high rates of workplace harassment—especially in male-dominated sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and technology (Catalyst, 2020; North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2022). In 2022, women working full time earned just 85.7% of the median weekly earnings of men in the state, mirroring national patterns of gender-based economic inequality (NC Department of Commerce, 2022; Blau & Kahn, 2017).

Research shows that women working in male-majority workplaces are more likely to encounter harassment and discrimination. A 2018 Pew Research Center study found that 49% of women in male-dominated industries view sexual harassment as a problem, compared to 32% in female-majority workplaces (Pew Research Center, 2018). These disparities are even more pronounced for transgender individuals: in North Carolina, 77% of transgender workers report experiencing harassment or mistreatment on the job, and 16% report losing a job due to their gender identity (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2015). Fear of retaliation, job loss, or professional stagnation discourages many workers from reporting discriminatory experiences (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

While federal laws such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act provide foundational protections against sex-based discrimination, North Carolina’s state-level legal framework does not adequately reinforce or extend these rights. The North Carolina Equal Employment Practices Act (NCEEPA) articulates public policy against employment discrimination but lacks a private right of action, stand-alone sexual harassment protections, pregnancy accommodations, and explicit coverage for LGBTQ+ individuals (Smith Anderson, n.d.; National Women’s Law Center, 2023; Movement Advancement Project, 2023). Consequently, many North Carolinians experiencing discrimination must turn to federal agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to seek redress—an avenue that can be procedurally burdensome, delayed, or insufficient, particularly for marginalized workers (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021).

This research project addresses a critical policy question: **How does North Carolina’s legal framework for addressing gender-based workplace discrimination compare to neighboring states—Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina—in terms of statutory protections and EEOC charge trends?** By examining state-level legal variation alongside regional EEOC complaint data (2009–2024), this study aims to identify the extent to which North Carolina’s limited legal protections may contribute to elevated rates of federal complaints and insufficient worker support. Rather than evaluating enforcement outcomes directly, this project uses complaint trends as a lens to benchmark North Carolina’s policy infrastructure and highlight where it falls short relative to regional peers.

Ultimately, this study seeks to inform evidence-based reforms by identifying legal and policy gaps that leave North Carolina workers vulnerable to gender-based discrimination. Deliverables include targeted policy recommendations, public-facing “know your rights” resources, and tools to help individuals navigate the complaint process. By connecting data trends with policy gaps, this project contributes to broader efforts to advance workplace gender equity and support safer, more inclusive work environments across North Carolina.

Methodology

This project applies a mixed-methods policy analysis framework that integrates quantitative data analysis with legal-structural benchmarking to evaluate how state-level protections (or lack thereof) shape reliance on federal reporting mechanisms.

Research Design

The study uses a descriptive, comparative approach to evaluate whether North Carolina’s volume of sex-based EEOC charges reflects structural legal gaps. It assumes that greater reliance on the EEOC—particularly in states with minimal state-level protections—may indicate:

- Limited legal recourse through state systems
- Greater barriers to internal resolution
- More severe or systemic workplace inequities

Quantitative Analysis

- Organized 16 years of EEOC data (2009–2024) into a custom comparative dataset using Excel and Tableau
- Filtered complaints by “basis of discrimination” to isolate sex-based charges
- Calculated yearly totals and means for each state
- Computed state-level averages of:
 - Number of sex-based complaints
 - Percentage of total EEOC charges that were sex-based
 - Total charges per state

Visual outputs were generated to reveal longitudinal trends and interstate disparities, with color-coded plots to aid comparison.

Legal Analysis

To assess whether complaint trends aligned with legal capacity, a statutory review of each state’s anti-discrimination framework was conducted using:

- Primary legal codes: N.C. General Statutes, Code of Virginia, Tennessee Code Annotated, South Carolina Code of Laws
- Secondary sources: Movement Advancement Project (2023), National Women’s Law Center (2023), UNC School of Government (2023)

Four core legal criteria were benchmarked across states:

- Private right of action
- Sexual harassment laws
- Pregnancy accommodations
- LGBTQ+ protections

Cross-Referencing Legal and Quantitative Findings

Legal benchmarking data was layered atop EEOC complaint trends to draw correlations between:

- The scope of legal protections
- Average EEOC sex-based complaint volume
- Percent of total complaints related to sex discrimination

For example, Virginia—having enacted the comprehensive Virginia Values Act (2020)—demonstrates notably lower sex-based complaint rates, suggesting that stronger legal protections may reduce the need for federal intervention. In contrast, North Carolina’s weaker framework correlates with consistently higher complaint volumes, reinforcing the hypothesis that limited state-level options contribute to elevated federal filing rates.

Data Analysis

This capstone project adopts a comparative, descriptive research design to assess the frequency and patterns of gender-based workplace discrimination complaints across four Southeastern states: North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina. The core objective is to determine how the strength or weakness of state-level legal protections influences workers’ reliance on federal complaint systems—particularly the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

Data Collection and Scope

To conduct this analysis, publicly available datasets from the EEOC spanning fiscal years 2009 to 2024 were utilized. These datasets report annually on the number and type of discrimination charges filed in each state, disaggregated by the basis of the complaint (e.g., sex, race, disability). This research focused on EEOC charges that cited sex-based discrimination, including those filed under claims of sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and gender identity bias. The analysis covers both private and public sector complaints filed under federal statutes such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and the Equal Pay Act.

Data was filtered to isolate charges filed specifically based on sex for each of the four target states. Three core indicators then calculated to demonstrate: (1) the average number of sex-based EEOC charges per year, (2) the proportion of all EEOC charges each year that were sex-based, and (3) total annual EEOC charges per state. These indicators allowed the tracking of both the raw volume of complaints and the relative share of sex-based charges across time and geography.

Visualization and Trend Analysis

The filtered and processed data was imported into Tableau to create a suite of visualizations designed to highlight regional trends and disparities. These included multi-year line graphs showing total EEOC charges over time, bar charts of sex-based charges by year and state, boxplots illustrating the distribution of complaints across the 16-year period, and correlation plots comparing sex-based complaints to the percentage of total charges. These visual tools provided a clearer picture of how consistently high (or low) states performed across key indicators of workplace discrimination reporting.

Among the most revealing findings were North Carolina’s persistently high volume and proportion of sex-based EEOC charges, and South Carolina’s consistently low numbers across all years—despite offering some of the weakest state-level protections in the region. The contrast between these two states,

when considered alongside legal context, strongly suggests that complaint data alone does not fully reflect true workplace conditions; rather, it is shaped by awareness, access, and legal infrastructure.

Legal Contextualization

To complement the quantitative data, a parallel legal review of each state’s discrimination laws was conducted using official legislative sources (e.g., North Carolina General Statutes, Code of Virginia, Tennessee Code Annotated, and South Carolina Code of Laws). This legal analysis focused on four primary areas: the presence or absence of a private right of action, statutory protections against sexual harassment, mandated pregnancy accommodations, and explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ protections. Where applicable, this review was supplemented by legal commentary and secondary analyses from organizations such as the Movement Advancement Project (2023), the National Women’s Law Center (2023), and the UNC School of Government.

This comparative legal review was critical in interpreting EEOC data. For example, Virginia, which implemented the Virginia Values Act in 2020, offers a robust legal framework including a private right of action and state-level remedies for sex-based discrimination. Notably, Virginia’s EEOC sex-based complaint volume was significantly lower than North Carolina’s—suggesting that stronger state-level protections may reduce reliance on federal processes. Conversely, South Carolina, which lacks even basic legal provisions for harassment or accommodations, reported the fewest complaints in both volume and percentage—raising concerns about underreporting or access barriers rather than the absence of discrimination.

Analytical Framing

This project does not attempt to measure enforcement outcomes or resolve causality between legal gaps and complaint rates. Instead, it positions EEOC complaint frequency as a signal—an imperfect but telling indicator of unmet legal needs and potential systemic weaknesses. North Carolina’s outlier status in both volume and proportion of sex-based complaints serves as a compelling case for state-level intervention. Meanwhile, South Carolina’s extremely low rates—when situated within its legal and cultural context—suggest the presence of deeper structural deterrents that suppress formal reporting.

By triangulating EEOC charge data with legal context and regional benchmarking, this project offers a policy-relevant snapshot of how legal frameworks shape access to justice in workplace discrimination cases. The findings directly inform the two major policy recommendations put forth in this research: the creation of a state-level Navigational Toolkit to guide workers through legal rights and reporting pathways, and the launch of a multi-stakeholder audit to assess the equity and completeness of EEOC reporting systems across the Southeast.

Key Findings

The data analysis reveals a striking and persistent pattern: **North Carolina stands out as the regional epicenter of sex-based workplace discrimination complaints filed with the EEOC.** Over the 16-year study period (2009–2024), North Carolina not only reported the highest *average number of sex-based complaints* per year—**1,154.4**—but also held the highest *percentage of total EEOC charges related to sex discrimination*, at **4.76%** (EEOC, 2024). These two metrics, when viewed together, underscore an

environment where gender-based discrimination is not only pervasive but potentially more visible—or at least more frequently escalated—than in neighboring states.

In contrast, **Virginia**, despite being a larger and more populous state, reported significantly lower average complaint volumes (**791.6 per year**) and a lower proportional share (**3.18%**). **Tennessee** followed with **822.9 average complaints** and a **3.12% share**, and **South Carolina** reported the lowest volume and share by far—**353.3 average complaints** and **just 1.38%** of all EEOC filings attributed to sex-based claims. These differences cannot be dismissed as random variation. Rather, they point toward underlying disparities in how accessible, protective, or responsive each state’s legal infrastructure is when it comes to gender-based discrimination.

A temporal analysis of the EEOC data further supports this interpretation. When visualized through trend lines and annual bar charts, **North Carolina’s sex-based complaint rates remain consistently high year-over-year**, with only minor fluctuations during national events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This consistency signals that elevated reporting is not due to isolated surges or short-term catalysts, but rather an ongoing structural issue. Unlike some peer states where complaint numbers rise and fall more dramatically in relation to economic or legal changes, North Carolina appears locked in a pattern of sustained federal-level complaint reliance—an outcome likely influenced by the state’s weak anti-discrimination legal framework.

From a legal standpoint, North Carolina’s deficiencies are well-documented. As of 2024, the **North Carolina Equal Employment Practices Act (NCEEPA)** does not provide a private right of action, lacks standalone sexual harassment or pregnancy accommodation statutes, and offers no explicit state-level protections for LGBTQ+ individuals beyond what federal law requires (North Carolina General Statutes, 2023; Movement Advancement Project, 2023). This effectively funnels all workers—regardless of the severity or nuance of their workplace discrimination—into the federal EEOC system. However, the EEOC is not an ideal front-line resource. It is often overburdened, under-resourced, and inaccessible for many low-income or marginalized workers due to the complexity of filing procedures, long timelines for resolution, and limited transparency in outcomes (National Women’s Law Center, 2023).

This dependence on a singular federal mechanism, especially in the absence of parallel state-level pathways, places North Carolina at a distinct disadvantage. The data supports this: among all four states, North Carolina reports both the **greatest raw number of sex-based EEOC complaints** and the **highest proportional reliance on the EEOC to handle them**, reinforcing the conclusion that state-level legal insufficiencies are not only real, but quantifiably impactful.

Virginia offers a compelling contrast. Since the passage of the **Virginia Values Act in 2020**, the state has emerged as a leader in workplace civil rights. This legislation extends a private right of action, mandates LGBTQ+ protections, and requires pregnancy accommodations—ensuring that both public and private sector employees can seek redress at the state level (Virginia General Assembly, 2023). Notably, Virginia’s EEOC data reflects this: complaint rates are not only lower, but their relative share of total filings has declined since 2020. This suggests that **robust, accessible state-level protections may successfully divert at least some volume from federal systems**, potentially leading to faster and more context-sensitive resolutions.

South Carolina, while reporting the lowest volume of sex-based complaints, should not be interpreted as a success story. Instead, the exceptionally low numbers—less than one-third the volume of North Carolina—raise red flags. South Carolina lacks a private right of action, does not have a standalone harassment

statute, and provides only minimal procedural clarity for discrimination reporting (South Carolina Code of Laws, 2023). In this legal vacuum, underreporting becomes a serious concern. As previous research has shown, legal infrastructure is a critical predictor of reporting rates: workers are far less likely to come forward when laws are vague, enforcement is unclear, and retaliation risks are high (Center for American Progress, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2018).

These findings are corroborated by correlation plots comparing sex-based complaints to overall EEOC charges. North Carolina consistently appears in the upper-right quadrant of these plots, indicating both **high volume and high reliance on sex-based claims**. This quadrant is sparsely populated, highlighting the exceptional nature of North Carolina's case. Virginia and Tennessee fall into more moderate categories, while South Carolina lingers in the lower-left—a space that may reflect a mix of underreporting and limited access, rather than a true absence of discrimination.

Taken together, the data supports several critical conclusions. First, **North Carolina's disproportionately high rates of sex-based EEOC complaints cannot be explained by population alone**—they stem from legal and procedural gaps that leave workers with few alternatives. Second, **states with stronger legal frameworks, like Virginia, tend to experience fewer federal complaints**, suggesting that state-level infrastructure plays a key role in both access to justice and systemic accountability. Third, **low complaint volumes in states like South Carolina should be viewed with caution** and may require targeted audits or further research to assess reporting integrity and access equity.

These insights directly inform the policy recommendations outline within this research. North Carolina urgently needs a **state-level Navigational Toolkit** to help workers understand their rights and access resources, especially given the complexity of the EEOC process. Additionally, a **multi-stakeholder audit**—involving state agencies, civil rights organizations, and academic institutions—is essential to evaluate the equity, efficiency, and accuracy of current complaint channels. These interventions are grounded not only in the lived realities of workers but in empirical evidence pointing to clear and consistent patterns of unmet legal need.

Data Presentation

Visual #1: Comparative Matrix of Workplace Discrimination Protections (NC, VA, TN, SC)

LEGAL CRITERIA	NC	VA	TN	SC
Private Right of Action	✗	✓	✓	✗
Sexual Harassment Law	✗	✓	⚠ Covered under THRA	⚠ Broadly under sex discrimination
Pregnancy Accommodations	✗	✓	⚠ Not clearly mandated	⚠ Not explicitly required
LGBTQ+ Protections	✗	✓	✗	✗
Paid Parental Leave (state)	✗	⚠ Some local policies	✗	✗

North Carolina consistently ranks as the least protective state in the matrix, with red “X” marks across all five legal categories. It lacks a private right of action, which means workers cannot file discrimination lawsuits directly under state law. It also has no standalone sexual harassment statute, no mandated pregnancy accommodations, no explicit state-level LGBTQ+ protections beyond federal baseline standards, and no state-provided paid parental leave. This systemic legislative vacuum forces affected workers—especially women, pregnant people, and LGBTQ+ individuals—to rely on the slower, more complex EEOC federal process, which may be inaccessible for low-wage or marginalized populations.

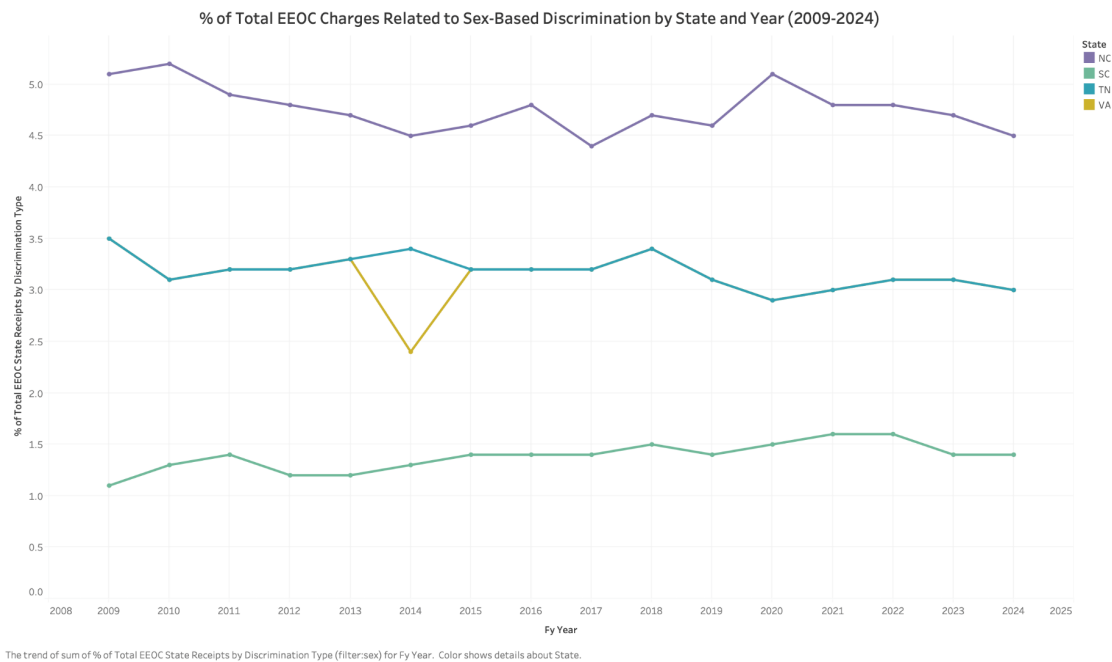
Virginia, by contrast, leads the region in legal protections. Since the passage of the Virginia Values Act in 2020, the state provides a private right of action, standalone sexual harassment and pregnancy accommodation laws, and LGBTQ+ protections—placing it in the strongest legal position among its peers. The only gap shown is the absence of statewide paid parental leave, though some local policies exist.

Tennessee occupies a middle ground. It offers a private right of action and technically includes harassment and pregnancy discrimination under the Tennessee Human Rights Act (THRA), but these protections are vague or inconsistently enforced. THRA’s language is broad, and enforcement standards can vary. Notably, the state provides no explicit LGBTQ+ protections and lacks paid parental leave.

South Carolina is slightly stronger than North Carolina only in ambiguity. The state does not have a private right of action and lacks a formal harassment statute or pregnancy protections. Some protections may be interpreted broadly under general sex discrimination law, but these are not clearly codified, leaving significant interpretive gaps. South Carolina also provides no LGBTQ+ protections or paid leave.

This matrix is not merely a checklist—it reveals the legal architecture that shapes whether workers feel protected, empowered to report, or even informed of their rights. When paired with complaint data, the matrix illustrates a powerful correlation: states like Virginia, with stronger legal frameworks, report fewer federal complaints, while states with little to no protections (NC and SC) face either reporting surges or suspiciously low numbers that suggest suppressed visibility. These discrepancies underscore the need for targeted state-level reforms, including clearer statutes, stronger enforcement pathways, and more accessible educational resources like the proposed Navigational Toolkit.

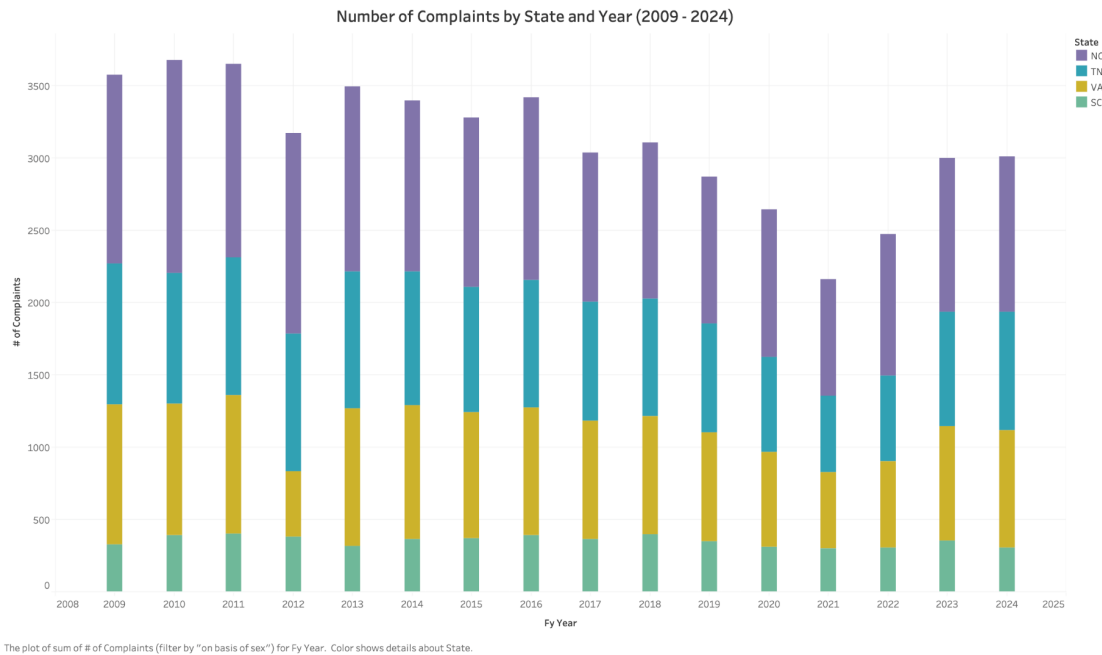
Visual #2: Number of Complaints by State and Year (2009–2024)



This time-series line graph captures the yearly volume of EEOC sex-based workplace discrimination complaints in North Carolina (NC), South Carolina (SC), Tennessee (TN), and Virginia (VA) from 2009 to 2024.

The consistently elevated line for NC, peaking above 1,300 in some years, highlights a sustained and systemic trend: more individuals in NC are filing federal complaints related to gender-based discrimination than in any neighboring state. TN and VA maintain steady mid-range trajectories, while SC remains significantly lower across the board. Notably, NC’s consistently high complaint totals—despite fluctuations in other states and in overall EEOC activity—suggest persistent structural or institutional gaps that drive reliance on federal reporting mechanisms. These trends lend strong empirical support to this project’s hypothesis: that state-level legal frameworks shape how often and how effectively workers pursue redress.

Visual #3: Number of Complaints by State and Year (2009–2024)



This stacked bar chart visualizes the total number of sex-based workplace discrimination complaints filed with the EEOC across four southern states—North Carolina (NC), South Carolina (SC), Tennessee (TN), and Virginia (VA)—between 2009 and 2024. Each bar represents a single year’s collective complaint total, segmented by state, allowing for direct comparison of both absolute complaint volume and each state’s relative contribution to the regional landscape.

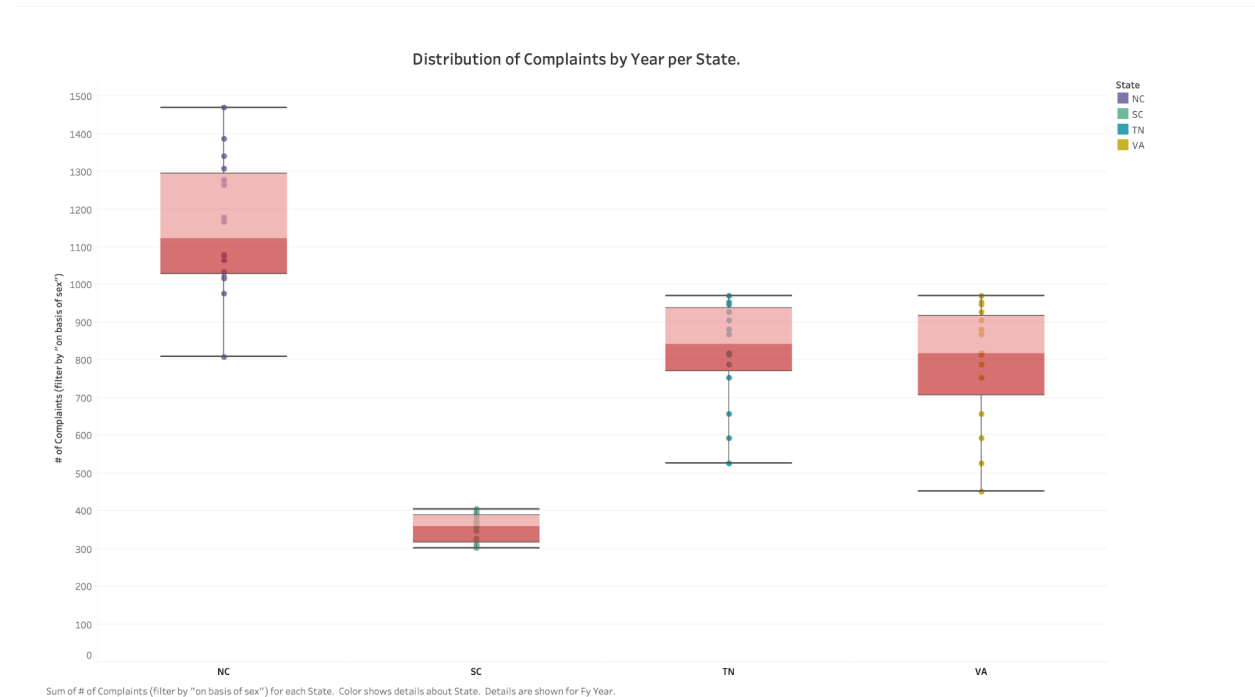
North Carolina (purple) dominates the top portion of nearly every year’s bar, often accounting for over one-third of total regional complaints in any given year. This sustained prominence in complaint volume—regardless of national trends or changes in neighboring states—points to deep-rooted gender-based inequities in NC’s workplace environments, as well as the absence of accessible, state-level protections that might otherwise divert cases away from federal systems.

Tennessee and Virginia demonstrate moderate and relatively balanced complaint activity, while South Carolina consistently contributes the fewest complaints—raising concerns about systemic underreporting or limited public knowledge of EEOC resources. The sharp dip in total complaints across all states in 2020 and 2021 likely reflects pandemic-related disruptions, but it is notable that NC quickly rebounds in subsequent years, regaining its prior share of regional filings.

This visual confirms one of the central findings of this research: North Carolina is not only a statistical outlier in raw volume, but a dominant driver of regional federal complaint activity related to sex-based workplace discrimination. The chart underscores the urgent need for a state-specific intervention—such as

the proposed Navigational Toolkit—to reduce overdependence on EEOC processes and address the legal vacuum currently affecting workers across the state.

Visual #4: Distribution of Complaints by Year per State (Box Plot)



This box plot visualizes the distribution of annual EEOC sex-based workplace discrimination complaints from 2009 to 2024 for four states: North Carolina (NC), South Carolina (SC), Tennessee (TN), and Virginia (VA). Each box represents the interquartile range (IQR) of complaints filed per year in each state, with the horizontal line inside the box indicating the median and the whiskers representing the range of typical yearly totals.

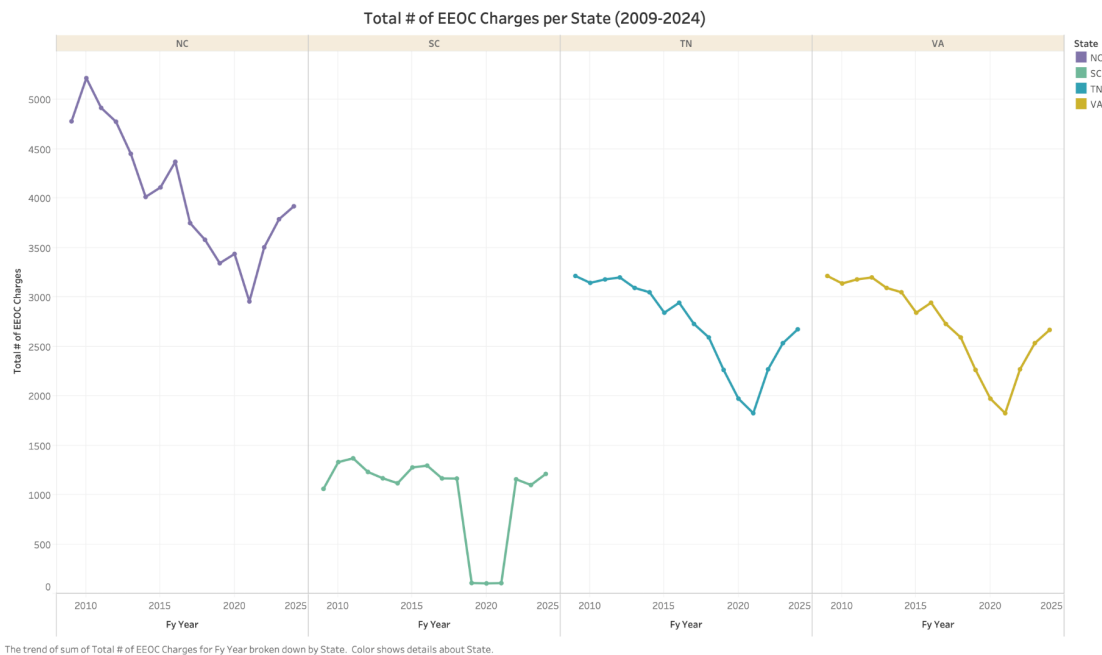
North Carolina clearly has the highest median and the widest distribution, ranging from just over 800 to nearly 1,500 complaints in some years. This reflects not only a high average but also variability across time—likely shaped by shifts in public awareness, high-profile events, or changes in reporting behavior.

South Carolina’s box is markedly compressed and lower than its peers, with a median below 400 and little year-to-year variability. This compression may reflect consistent underreporting or lack of engagement with federal complaint systems. Tennessee and Virginia have similar medians and IQRs, falling between 700 and 1,000 complaints per year. However, Tennessee shows slightly more skewness, suggesting sporadic spikes in complaint volume.

Overall, this visual reinforces the project’s core argument: North Carolina is not only reporting more complaints—it’s doing so with sustained frequency and a wider range than any of its peers. South Carolina’s low and narrow distribution further supports the hypothesis that complaint volume alone may not reflect actual discrimination rates, but rather how structural factors enable or suppress reporting.

These insights further justify the need for improved state-level navigation tools in NC and more research into underreporting in SC.

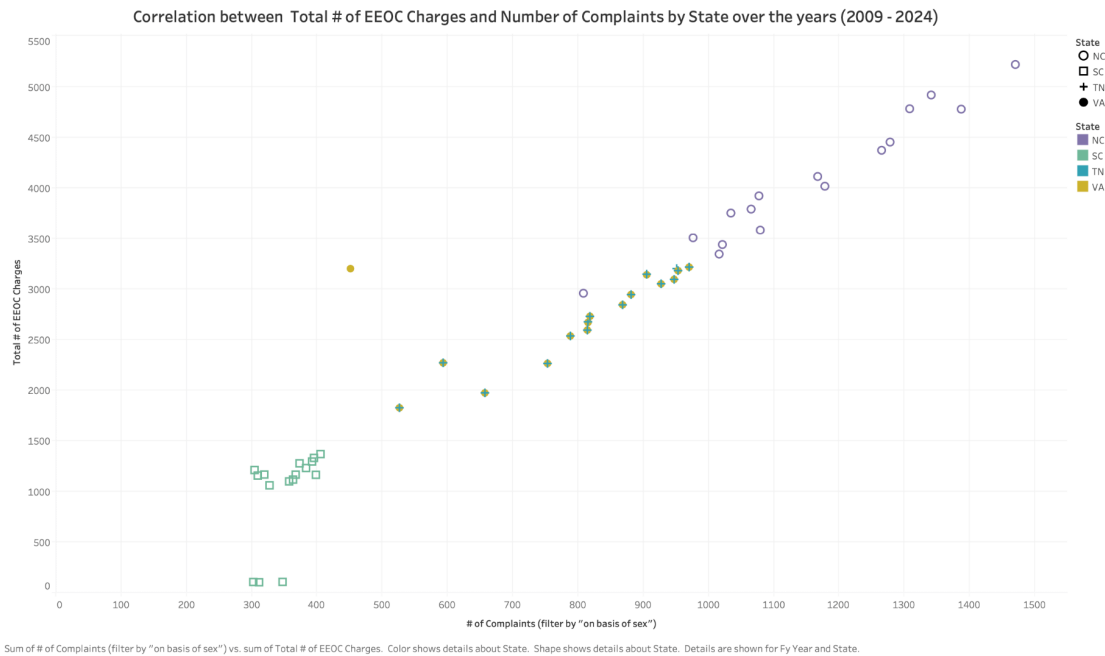
Visual #5: Total EEOC Charges per State by Year (2009–2024)



This graph tracks the total number of EEOC charges—across all bases of discrimination—filed in each state annually from 2009 to 2024.

North Carolina consistently reports one of the highest total volumes in the region, suggesting a broader and sustained pattern of federal engagement with workplace discrimination claims. While these elevated totals may reflect gaps in state-level protections that drive more workers toward federal processes, they may also reflect other dynamics—such as greater public awareness, more legal advocacy infrastructure, or a higher sense of empowerment among workers to report at the federal level. However, without qualitative data, it is not possible to confirm whether North Carolinians are more inclined or better equipped to file EEOC complaints. This visual demonstrates that federal engagement is high and persistent in North Carolina, reinforcing the need to examine whether current state systems are adequately accessible, trusted, or effective in addressing workplace discrimination.

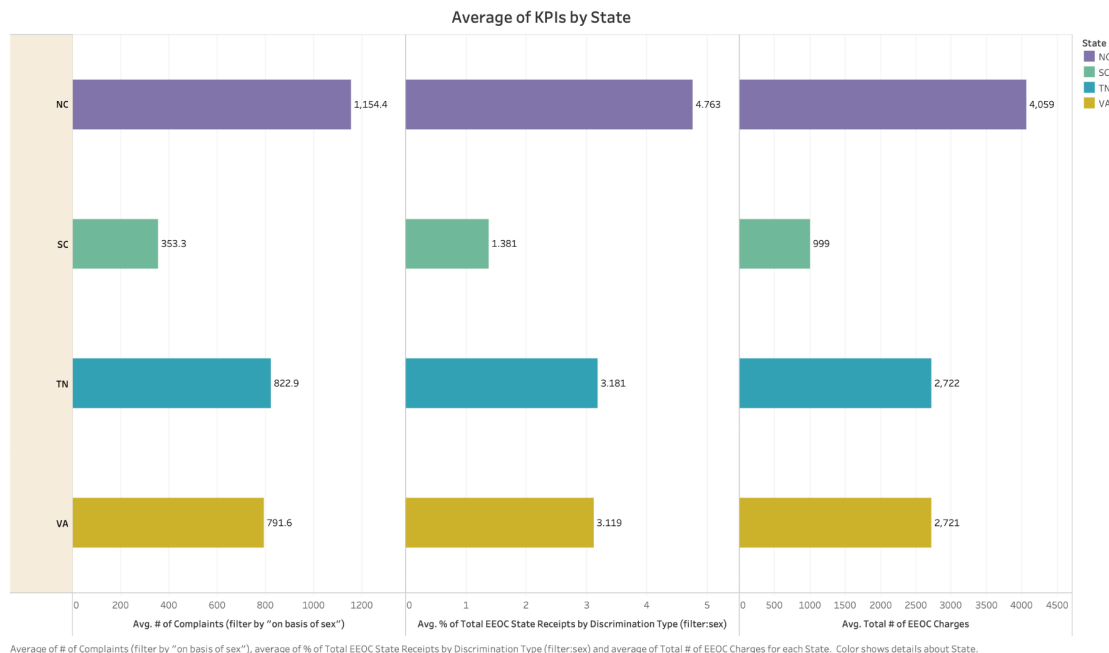
Visual #6: Correlation Between Total EEOC Charges and # of Sex-Based Complaint



This scatterplot compares each state's total EEOC complaint volume to its number of sex-based complaints.

Once again, NC emerges as the outlier—its strong positioning in the upper-right corner confirms that the state experiences both a high frequency of total complaints and a high concentration of sex-based claims. VA and TN display more proportional patterns, suggesting a balanced mix of issues being reported, while SC remains far behind in both metrics. These findings indicate that North Carolina's EEOC data cannot be dismissed as a byproduct of overall filing volume alone—the gender-based dimension is disproportionately elevated.

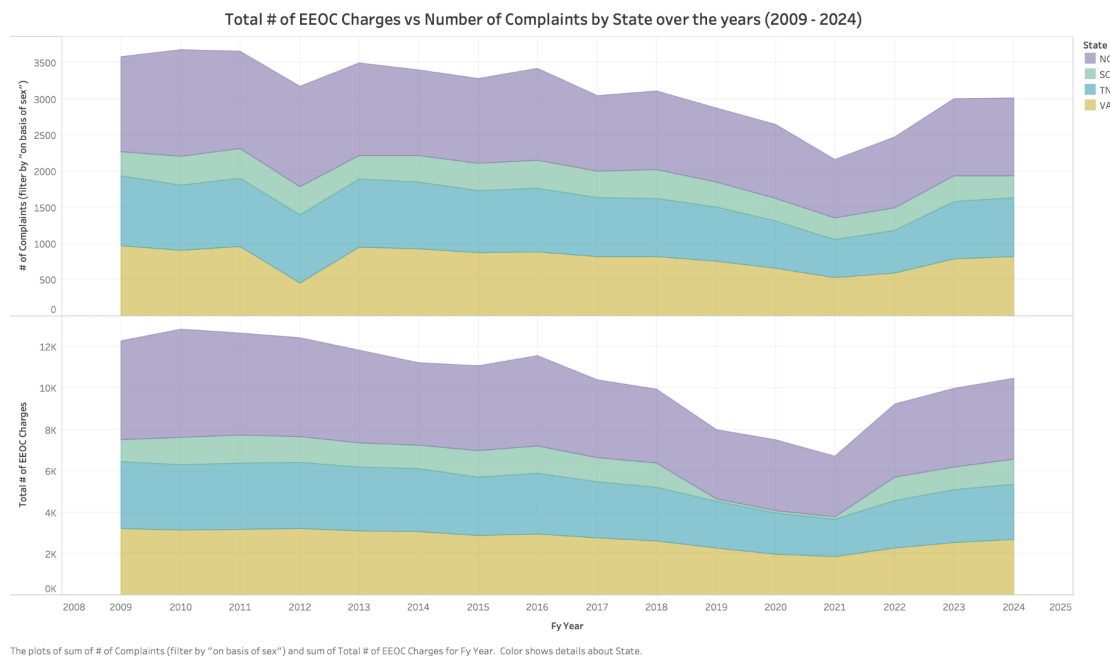
Visual #7: Average of Key Performance Indicators by State



This triple-bar visual summarizes each state's average values across three variables: the total number of EEOC complaints, the number of sex-based complaints, and the percentage of complaints related to sex discrimination.

North Carolina once again ranks highest in all three categories—**averaging 4,059 total charges, 1,154 sex-based charges, and 4.76% of complaints tied to sex discrimination**. These metrics, viewed together, underscore a uniquely high burden of gender-based workplace harm within a broader climate of institutional dysfunction. SC, on the other hand, reports the lowest averages across all indicators, which should not be interpreted as success. Instead, it highlights a need for deeper inquiry into barriers to access, knowledge, and trust in public institutions. VA and TN cluster more closely, offering useful baselines for legal reform benchmarks.

Visual #8: Total Number of EEOC Charges vs. Number of Sex-Based Complaints by State (2009–2024)



This dual-panel stacked area chart presents two distinct but related trends over a 16-year period: the top panel shows the total number of sex-based EEOC complaints filed each year, while the bottom panel illustrates the total number of all EEOC charges (regardless of basis) across four southeastern states: North Carolina (NC), South Carolina (SC), Tennessee (TN), and Virginia (VA). Each state's contribution is layered within the total, making it possible to assess both cumulative trends and relative state-by-state weight over time.

In the top panel, North Carolina (in purple) consistently contributes the largest share of regional sex-based complaints, further affirming its status as a hotspot for federally reported gender-based workplace discrimination. Even when total complaint volumes fluctuate across the region—such as during the COVID-19 pandemic—North Carolina's share remains prominent. In contrast, South Carolina contributes the smallest and most stable volume across the years, a pattern that raises serious questions about underreporting or lack of access to EEOC pathways.

The bottom panel echoes a similar trend, with North Carolina again leading in total EEOC charges. What's striking is how proportionally aligned North Carolina's sex-based and overall EEOC complaint volumes are over time. This suggests that gender-based workplace harm is not just one among many issues—it is a central feature of NC's broader civil rights landscape. In Virginia and Tennessee, by contrast, the relative contribution of sex-based complaints is smaller in proportion to overall charges, suggesting more distributed or diversified patterns of workplace discrimination.

Together, these panels provide powerful longitudinal context for this project's core findings: that North Carolina exhibits both absolute and proportional overrepresentation in federal discrimination complaints

tied to sex, reflecting the urgent need for more robust state-level legal infrastructure and targeted navigation tools. At the same time, South Carolina’s persistently low volumes across both panels may mask a hidden crisis of exclusion or reporting barriers, reinforcing the value of a multi-stakeholder audit of EEOC access and awareness.

Alternatives Matrix	
Criteria	Policy Option 1: State-Level Navigational Toolkit
Policy Description	Create a centralized, digital resource hub to guide NC workers through workplace discrimination protections, reporting, and support services.
Primary Goal	Improve access to information and empower individuals to take action through state-level knowledge infrastructure.
Lead Implementers	NC Department of Labor, Office of Administrative Hearings, or another designated state agency
Feasibility	High – Can be implemented at the state level with legislative or administrative action
Key Benefits	- Fills information gaps for workers - Increases state-level visibility of rights - Reduces dependence on federal EEOC process
Evidence of Need	NC has highest EEOC sex-based complaint volume and share; current resources are fragmented and inaccessible
Challenges	- Requires interagency collaboration and sustained updates - Initial development costs
Equity Impact	High – Directly increases access to protections for marginalized and under-resourced workers
Time Horizon	Short-to-Medium Term (1–2 years for full launch and iteration)
Complementary Potential	Can inform and be informed by research findings; improves immediate accessibility while deeper systemic issues are explored

Criteria	Policy Option 2: Multi-Stakeholder Audit of EEOC System
Policy Description	Launch a collaborative research initiative to evaluate the EEOC’s complaint process for accuracy, equity, and completeness across U.S. states.
Primary Goal	Ensure that EEOC complaint data accurately reflects workplace conditions and reporting systems function fairly and equitably.
Lead Implementers	Academic institutions, state civil rights offices, labor scholars, independent research groups
Feasibility	Moderate – Methodologically feasible but dependent on research funding and political climate surrounding DEI
Key Benefits	- Builds a stronger evidence base for interpreting EEOC data - Identifies structural barriers to reporting - Supports long-term system reform
Evidence of Need	SC has unusually low EEOC complaint volume despite weak protections—suggesting potential underreporting or data inaccuracies
Challenges	- Political resistance due to current DEI rollbacks - Long research timeline and potential difficulty securing buy-in from multiple actors
Equity Impact	High – Indirect but powerful, as it addresses system-level biases and procedural inequities
Time Horizon	Medium-to-Long Term (2–4 years for complete research, findings, and policy uptake)
Complementary Potential	Can validate and enhance effectiveness of the Toolkit by assessing where current reporting systems succeed or fail

To respond to the structural deficiencies identified in North Carolina’s approach to gender-based workplace discrimination, this investigation proposes two interrelated but distinct policy interventions: the development of a state-level Navigational Toolkit and the implementation of a multi-stakeholder audit of EEOC complaint processes. These alternatives address different layers of the problem—one aimed at improving the accessibility and clarity of support for individual workers, and the other at evaluating the structural integrity of the federal complaint system itself. Together, they offer a roadmap toward more equitable, informed, and responsive workplace protections in North Carolina.

The first alternative is the establishment of a centralized, digital Navigational Toolkit that would serve as a public-facing hub for individuals experiencing gender-based workplace discrimination. The Toolkit would include detailed information on relevant state and federal protections, step-by-step guidance for filing complaints, and referrals to support services such as legal aid, advocacy organizations, and mental health resources. It would also contain tailored content for historically marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ+ workers, pregnant individuals, and those employed in male-dominated industries.

This solution is highly feasible, particularly if implemented through an existing state agency such as the North Carolina Department of Labor. The cost of developing and maintaining such a toolkit is relatively low, and it could be modeled after successful initiatives in other states. Moreover, because it does not alter legal statutes but rather clarifies and organizes existing ones, the Toolkit is unlikely to face significant political opposition. In terms of impact, the Toolkit would directly improve equity by reducing informational and procedural barriers that disproportionately affect low-wage workers, women of color, and non-citizens. It would make the process of filing a complaint—whether at the state or federal level—more transparent and accessible, especially for those navigating it for the first time.

This recommendation is grounded in the project’s empirical findings: North Carolina consistently reports the highest volume and share of sex-based EEOC complaints in the region, suggesting a significant unmet need for accessible, localized guidance. Rather than replacing the EEOC, the Toolkit would complement it by providing a structured entry point into the broader system of legal protections.

The second policy alternative addresses the larger systemic question of whether the EEOC complaint process itself is functioning equitably and effectively—particularly in states like South Carolina, where complaint volumes remain anomalously low. This option proposes a coordinated, multi-stakeholder audit of the EEOC’s complaint data and procedural accessibility, led by an interdisciplinary team of civil rights researchers, legal scholars, and policy practitioners. The audit would seek to understand where, how, and why barriers emerge in the reporting process, and would pay particular attention to issues of underreporting, dropout rates, and procedural inequities.

Although this alternative is more complex to implement than the Toolkit and may require sustained coordination across state and possibly federal levels, it remains feasible, especially in the current policy climate that supports equity audits and data transparency. The potential impact of such an audit is substantial: it could surface the hidden dynamics that prevent workers from filing complaints or following through on them—whether due to language barriers, fear of retaliation, or lack of institutional trust.

The audit would also provide critical insights into state-by-state discrepancies, such as the puzzlingly low EEOC complaint numbers in South Carolina, which may reflect systemic silencing rather than an absence of workplace discrimination. Empirically, this recommendation is rooted in the project’s comparative analysis, which identified South Carolina as a state with minimal legal protections and significantly lower-than-expected federal complaint volume—suggesting a crisis of invisibility rather than equity.

Taken together, these alternatives address both immediate and long-term needs. The Navigational Toolkit provides a tangible, high-impact intervention that can be implemented quickly to improve transparency and access for workers navigating complex legal processes. The multi-stakeholder audit, while more methodologically intensive, is essential to diagnosing the structural shortcomings of the EEOC system itself—particularly in states with legal voids or historically low reporting. Importantly, these recommendations are not mutually exclusive. In fact, if implemented in tandem, they form a layered and mutually reinforcing strategy that meets workers where they are while also holding institutions accountable for where they fall short. Both alternatives are evidence-based, equity-centered, and aligned with this project’s broader goal: to close the gap between legal protections on paper and the lived experiences of workers in North Carolina and beyond.

Policy Recommendations

In response to the structural inequities and procedural barriers revealed through comparative legal analysis and EEOC data assessment, a two-pronged policy approach is recommended to improve workplace discrimination redress in North Carolina. First, the state should establish a centralized Navigational Toolkit to help individuals understand and exercise their legal rights. Second, a multi-stakeholder audit of the EEOC's sex-based complaint process should be commissioned to assess the integrity and accessibility of the federal system, especially in states where low complaint volumes may obscure high levels of unmet need.

Policy Recommendation #1

North Carolina should establish a state-level Navigational Toolkit, and a centralized resource hub dedicated to addressing gender-based workplace discrimination. As demonstrated through the deliverable—a draft Navigational Toolkit—there is currently no singular, comprehensive resource guiding individuals through the complex process of identifying, reporting, and addressing workplace discrimination. Before substantial change can occur, individuals must clearly understand their rights and the available complaint procedures, yet such resources remain fragmented and inaccessible in North Carolina. The Navigational Toolkit would serve as a centrally maintained repository by a designated state agency, such as the North Carolina Department of Labor or the Office of Administrative Hearings, accessible via an intuitive digital platform. It should include:

1. **Legal Rights Education:** Clear explanations of state and federal protections, including Title VII, the Equal Pay Act, and specific North Carolina statutes. Currently, as indicated by the legislative analysis, the North Carolina Equal Employment Practices Act (NCEEPA) lacks essential protections such as a private right of action and explicit harassment or pregnancy accommodations, leaving individuals heavily reliant on federal recourse.
2. **Reporting Roadmap:** A simplified, step-by-step guide for documenting incidents, filing internal complaints, and escalating issues through the EEOC or state-level agencies. Data analysis from EEOC charge data (2009–2024) underscores this need: North Carolina consistently exhibits the highest average number of sex-based EEOC complaints annually (1,154 complaints per year), significantly higher compared to neighboring states such as Virginia (353), Tennessee (823), and South Carolina (792). Additionally, sex-based complaints represent approximately 4.8% of total EEOC charges in North Carolina, reflecting a substantial reliance on federal complaint mechanisms due to insufficient state-level protections.
3. **Resource Hub:** Curated resources including access to free or low-cost legal aid, mental health support services, advocacy networks, and educational materials explicitly tailored to workplace discrimination cases.
4. **Success Stories and Case Studies:** Illustrative examples demonstrating how individuals in North Carolina have successfully navigated the complaint process, advocating for themselves and instigating broader cultural and policy shifts. These examples provide inspiration and practical guidance for those experiencing isolation or uncertainty.
5. **Accessibility and Continuous Updates:** Ensuring this toolkit remains responsive and up to date, with periodic reviews to incorporate new legislation, landmark cases, and evolving best practices from both legal and advocacy communities.

The Toolkit addresses both informational and procedural gaps revealed in this research. States like Virginia, which have enacted expansive legal protections under statutes such as the Virginia Values Act, show significantly lower EEOC complaint volumes, suggesting that robust in-state remedies can reduce

reliance on federal processes. By contrast, North Carolina’s minimal statutory protections correlate with elevated complaint levels, reinforcing the urgent need for more accessible navigation tools.

As part of this investigation, a 22-page comprehensive draft of the Navigational Toolkit was developed, which serves as a well-researched and fully conceptualized prototype. This deliverable includes step-by-step complaint pathways, legal rights education, curated support resources, real-world case studies, and tools for documenting workplace harm. It demonstrates not only what such a Toolkit could look like but also which features are most critical for achieving policy impact.

Policy Recommendation #2: A Multi-Stakeholder Audit of EEOC Sex-Based Complaint Processes

In tandem with the Toolkit, a multi-stakeholder research initiative is recommended to audit the EEOC’s sex-based complaint infrastructure across the Southeast, with particular focus on states like South Carolina. While North Carolina reports the highest regional volume and proportion of sex-based EEOC filings, South Carolina consistently reports the lowest figures across all metrics. Between 2009 and 2024, South Carolina averaged just 353 sex-based complaints annually, and only 1.38% of total EEOC charges were tied to sex discrimination—despite its lack of comprehensive legal protections and a broader history of gender inequity.

This statistical discrepancy suggests potential underreporting, but current data systems do not allow for causal inference. South Carolina’s legal framework—absent a private right of action, explicit harassment protections, or mandated pregnancy accommodations—does not support the idea that low complaint volume reflects a lower incidence of discrimination. Rather, the data points toward a **potential gap in access, trust, or procedural transparency** that may be obscuring the true scale of workplace inequity.

To clarify these issues, it is recommended that the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in collaboration with the EEOC, state civil rights offices, and academic institutions, conduct a national and regional audit of EEOC complaint pathways. This initiative should evaluate:

- The accuracy and completeness of data collection
- Procedural equity in how complaints are filed, processed, and resolved
- Accessibility barriers by geography, race, income level, and industry
- The extent to which systemic factors (e.g., fear of retaliation, legal illiteracy) prevent or discourage reporting

The findings of this audit would help determine whether EEOC complaint data reflects actual patterns of discrimination or merely the uneven visibility of harm. Until such an audit is completed, policymakers and researchers should treat EEOC charge data not as a definitive indicator of workplace equity, but as a valuable signal that must be contextualized within the legal and cultural frameworks of each state.

Executive Summary

This investigation focuses upon North Carolina’s gender-based workplace discrimination protections relative to neighboring states—Virginia, Tennessee, and South Carolina—by analyzing Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sex-based complaint trends from 2009 to 2024 alongside each state’s legal frameworks. North Carolina stands out with the highest average number of sex-based EEOC complaints per year (1,154) and the highest proportion of total EEOC charges related to sex

discrimination (4.76%). These figures suggest a systemic reliance on federal redress mechanisms—fueled, in part, by inadequate state-level legal protections and fragmented public-facing resources.

The research seeks to address two core issues: (1) the absence of a centralized resource to help individuals navigate complex complaint processes, and (2) regional inconsistencies in EEOC data that may obscure deeper patterns of underreporting or access inequity—especially in states like South Carolina.

Methodology and Data Analysis

A mixed-methods policy analysis was employed:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** EEOC charge data (2009–2024) was cleaned, filtered by sex-based claims, and visualized across four states using Tableau. Key indicators included average annual complaint volume and percent of total charges related to sex discrimination.
- **Legal Analysis:** Primary legal codes and secondary policy databases were reviewed to benchmark state protections across four domains: private right of action, harassment laws, pregnancy accommodations, and LGBTQ+ protections.
- **Comparative Framework:** Legal findings were cross-referenced with EEOC trends to assess whether stronger legal protections correlate with reduced federal complaint reliance. Virginia, with expansive protections under the Virginia Values Act (2020), had both fewer complaints and a lower percentage of sex-based charges, suggesting more effective in-state redress.

Key Findings

- North Carolina is a regional outlier. It leads the region in both sex-based EEOC complaint volume and share of total discrimination filings, suggesting a legal and procedural environment that leaves workers few state-level avenues for recourse.
- South Carolina reports the fewest complaints, both in volume and percentage, despite having the weakest legal protections. This raises concerns about systemic underreporting or exclusion rather than equitable conditions.
- Legal gaps in NC are substantial. The North Carolina Equal Employment Practices Act (NCEEPA) lacks a private right of action, offers no standalone harassment or pregnancy accommodation protections, and provides no LGBTQ+ workplace protections at the state level.
- Stronger state frameworks may suppress federal reliance. Virginia’s legal reforms have likely contributed to its reduced EEOC complaint share post-2020, offering a model for effective legal deterrents and accessible remedies.

Deliverables

- **Navigational Toolkit (22-page prototype):** Developed as part of this investigation, this digital-first resource outlines complaint steps, legal education, curated support networks, and case studies to help workers in North Carolina identify, document, and act on workplace discrimination. The draft demonstrates how a trauma-informed, user-friendly resource can reduce procedural barriers and increase awareness of rights and protections.
- **Legislative Analysis Report:** A structured review of existing state and federal anti-discrimination laws was conducted with a focus on how protections vary across states and industries. This report

highlights statutory gaps in North Carolina and provides a policy basis for comparative benchmarking.

- Data Visualizations and Legal Matrix: Comprehensive charts and comparative matrices were created to demonstrate complaint trends, highlight disparities, and visualize the relationship between legal protections and complaint frequency.

Policy Recommendations

1. Implement a Centralized Navigational Toolkit.

North Carolina should adopt and maintain a public-facing resource hub—housed within an agency such as the Department of Labor—that consolidates legal education, reporting guidance, support services, and success stories. The toolkit would directly address informational inequities and reduce overreliance on federal processes.

2. Commission a Multi-Stakeholder EEOC Audit.

A regional audit—led by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and in partnership with state agencies and academic institutions—should evaluate EEOC complaint process equity, access, and accuracy. Special attention should be paid to South Carolina’s anomalously low filing rates, which may obscure significant unmet legal needs.

Conclusion

North Carolina’s high volume of sex-based EEOC complaints is not merely a product of population—it reflects unmet legal need and a lack of navigable reporting resources. Meanwhile, South Carolina’s low reporting suggests the opposite: that workers may be unable or unwilling to file complaints due to systemic barriers. This investigation offers practical, implementable solutions grounded in data, legal analysis, and user experience design. The Navigational Toolkit and audit recommendation together offer a dual strategy: one to empower workers today, and one to ensure equity in the systems meant to protect them tomorrow.

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