

Overcoming Barriers to Gender Equity in the Workplace: Why aren't we there yet?

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Abstract

Gender inequity continues to exist in all facets of society, community and the workplace. This paper seeks to explore the myths and truisms about gender equity in the workplace, particularly in large organisations where, for various reasons, gendered hierarchies and entrenched behaviours tend to prevail. Despite evidence of growing concern, there is still limited understanding of how gender inequity is impacting on performance and culture in the workplace. Drawing from a range of sources, this paper provides an overview of insights into current trends of women's employment, prospects through the ranks, and progress throughout the work lifecycle.

It considers challenges arising from the outset: the recruitment of women and the potential to succeed; the pervasive unconscious bias and perceptions about the capabilities of women; and 'gendered' roles and spaces. The paper explores impediments to success for women at the individual, institutional and culturally constructed levels, and analyses both contributing and impacting factors in this equation. Implications of the intersection between gender and the broader dimensions of diversity (such as ethnicity, age, disability) are also explored.

The paper identifies and recommends strategies for cultural change in the workplace, including policy development and implementation to ensure that gender equity transitions to core business. It includes strategies that look to how organisational leaders move from valuing equity and diversity to taking positive action, even where the culture is not readily conducive and evidence suggests that the pace of change in addressing issues of gender diversity is rather slow.

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Introduction

Gender inequity continues to exist in all facets of society, community and the workplace. As organisations in every sector and size become more diverse with clients, customers and staff from different backgrounds and experiences, issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, physical abilities etc. tend to increasingly prevail. However, it is evident that the majority of managers working in global organisations may not be addressing issue relating to diversity, let alone seeing its value, in particular, how a diverse culture can impact on organisational outcomes.

This is despite empirical and professional evidence that demonstrates the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce, for example, in the study by Ellison and Mullin (2014) which used eight years of revenue data and survey results from a professional-services firm with more than 60 offices internationally. The study included all-male and all-female and diverse-gender offices. The focus of the study was on multiple perspectives including staff satisfaction, cooperation, and morale, and not just one generalised measure of workplace satisfaction. Ellison and Mullin (2014) found that shifting from an all-male or all-female office to one split evenly along gender lines increased revenue by up to 41 percent. One explanation was that greater social diversity meant wider experience, adding to the collective knowledge of a team working together, and leading to more effective performance than when teams were all male or all female. They noted that even the ‘perception’ that work organisations were diverse was sufficient and led to enhanced satisfaction. At the same time, they found that it was not sufficient to have diversity policies per se without actual engagement and participation in diverse teams, as this led to less satisfaction.

Gender equity¹ is a core part of valuing diversity. It is widely recognised (Catalyst, 2014; LeanIn.org & McKinsey, 2015) that gender inclusion leads to improvements in both financial and social capital of an organisation. It is contended that CEOs and management need to become less complacent about diversity and see it as a significant part of their strategy. To achieve this, employers, management and staff need better understanding of how gender bias plays out in the workplace and contributes to creating fewer opportunities for women and impacting on their career success in a significant way. Data from the Catalyst (2014) provide an indication of the seemingly low levels of recognition of women in senior management positions as indicated by data in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Women in Senior Management Positions by Region (2013)

Region	Women in Senior Management Positions (2013)
ASEAN	32%
Europe, except for Nordic Region	25%
Europe, Nordic Region	24%
Latin America	23%
North America	21%

Catalyst (2014). *Women in Management, Global Comparison*

¹ The simple binary of male and female no longer holds. There is diversity and intersectionality within gender itself e.g. transgender M2F or F2M, genderqueer, woman, man, intersex and so on. However, the focus in this paper is on women in relation to others groups.

A study and report on “Women in the Workplace” (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey, 2015) involving 118 US companies and around 30,000 employees shows that the pace of gender progress has been strikingly slow. Their data reveals that from 2012 to 2015 the share of women in entry-level positions rose from 42% to 45%; the share of women at senior manager/director level rose from 28% to 32%; and progress was least evident at the C-suite level where the percentage rose by a single point from 16% to 17%. The report noted a lack of consistent monitoring for compliance with affirmative action programs and policies (also reflected in the 2014 study by Ellison and Mullin), and different standards of performance required for women and men both inside and outside of the organisations. In yet another report, the the McKinsey Global Institute (2015) estimated that in a ‘full potential’ scenario, in which women participated in the global economy identically to men, it would add up to \$12 trillion or 26% of annual GDP by 2025.

This paper seeks to explore the myths and truisms about gender equity in the workplace, particularly in large organisations where, for various reasons, gendered hierarchies and entrenched behaviours tend to prevail. Despite evidence of growing concern, there is still limited understanding of how gender inequity is impacting on performance and culture in the workplace. Drawing from a range of sources, this paper provides an overview of insights into current trends of women’s employment, prospects through the ranks, and progress throughout the work lifecycle.

It considers challenges arising from the outset: the recruitment of women and potential to succeed, the pervasive unconscious bias and perceptions about the capabilities of women, and ‘gendered’ roles and spaces. The paper explores impediments to success for women at the individual (personal), institutional and culturally constructed levels, and analyses both contributing and impacting factors in this equation. Implications of the intersection between gender and the broader dimensions of diversity (such as ethnicity, age, disability) are also explored.

The paper identifies and recommends strategies for cultural change in the workplace, including policy development and implementation to ensure that gender equity transitions to core business. It includes strategies that look to how organisational leaders move from valuing equity and diversity to taking positive action, even where the culture is not readily conducive. A whole of institution approach is considered and a brief case study of an institution in the process of change is presented.

Recruitment

Are women and men recruited in the same way and are their resumes, experience and referee reports assessed equally? For example, bias, particularly unconscious bias, in recruitment, selection and performance reviews is significant. A study by Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman (2012) confirms the inherent bias that is prevalent. It involved the rating of 127 applications for an administrative position in Science by faculty professors who were given exactly the same information for all the applications, the only difference being that 50% were assigned male names and 50% were assigned female names. In this study, across the board, female applicants were rated as less hireable and less competent than their male counterparts; and were allocated lower salaries and lower level of mentoring support.

Furthermore, both male and female faculty professors expressed the same or similar unconscious bias against women.

Recruiters (and some organisations) have sought to make changes in different ways to combat the unconscious bias. For example, some have instigated blind recruitment and selection, concealing the names, genders and other identifying details of applicants, and have reported an increased success for women applicants, including in senior roles. Other recruiters have reacted by ensuring that a minimum of 30% of potential candidates or applicants are women as a strategy used in the 30% Club (<http://30percentclub.org/>). Recruitment initiatives have encouraged the inclusion of advertisements that emphasise family-friendly aspects of the jobs, offering flexible hours and options to work from home. The training of managers on issues of unconscious bias also plays a part and is being increasingly made available, as well as policies that clearly articulate and govern organisations' strategies on the recruitment of women in the workforce. It has taken a long while for these developments to occur and one continues to wonder "Why aren't we there yet?"

Performance Appraisals

There is much evidence to suggest that how women and men are appraised at work may often not be objectively constructed (e.g. PwC Women in Work Index, 2015). Women have to do more than men to be promoted and conversely less than men to be judged adversely for it². Appraisals are socially constructed, regardless of the associated policies and rubrics giving them an objective appearance. Further contributing to a complex web is how this outward objective assessment affects not only managerial choices but also how individuals perceive themselves and this in turn, guides their choice-making (Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier (2008). Evaluators appraise a person's performance subjectively regardless of the objective indicators. Further, age and life cycle dynamics are important factors in this process, as well as how people describe and perceive career success across time. Both age and life cycle are particularly relevant for women. Managers need to be aware of gender bias in performance evaluations and make sure that evaluation criteria are set in advance, understood, and measurable in an objective yet inclusive manner. Bias in appraisals need to be monitored throughout the process and mitigating circumstances taken into consideration.

Career Outcomes for Women

Many women lack confidence in their own success – often on the basis of culturally socialised belief³, and this lack of confidence manifests itself in many ways in terms of career progression (or lack of progression). Rasdi, Ismail, & Garavan, (2011) note that career success depends on perceived "... positive psychological or work-related outcomes, or personal and professional achievements an individual has gathered from their working experience" (p. 3529) by women and significant others responsible for evaluating them. This is an important perspective as research differentiates between personal and shared measures of success (Dries et al., 2008; Ituma, Simpson, Ovadje,

² PwC Women in Work Index 2015 <https://www.pwc.com.au/people-business/assets/publications/international-womens-day-mar15.pdf>

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Cornelius, & Mordi, 2011; Rasdi et al., 2011). Personal measures are those imposed by an individual – that is, how they appraise their own performance and accomplishments (Ng & Feldman, 2014). In turn, these personal measures influence how a person perceives themselves in relation to others using markers such as promotion, income and acknowledgements. Others also evaluate the individual accordingly and this, in turn, affects career path opportunities.

Observation of and training in these nuances of assessing performance, and potential and contextual factors are equally applicable to all groups in the workplace, especially employees from diverse backgrounds where there are additional complex factors (McCall, 2005).

Organisational Culture

Organisational practices and cultures also instigate, perpetuate and reinforce biases (Afiouni & Karam, 2014; Dries et al., 2008; Dries, 2011). Institutional policies, guidelines, training and traditional practices are all essential features of an organisation that seeks to attract, nurture and retain the best talent. Ideally this should include a balanced approach to gender equitable recruitment. There is no ‘silver bullet’ solution to equitable recruiting but the need for a concerted effort, multi-pronged approaches, and long term commitment to addressing the issues raised in the context of this paper. As Johnson, Warr, Hegarty, & Guillemin (2015) note:

Nesting of local initiatives within organisational policies and broader legislation is important because sustained change at local levels is concomitant with organisational support and social structural contexts. (p.697)

Clearly, gender related issues of recruitment, retention, success etc. are necessarily intertwined. Important drivers that could bring management of the various aspects together and thus serve to set institutional behaviour are formal and explicit policies and guidelines. As Kreitz (2008) notes, they work to deconstruct and reshape conventional beliefs and biases by clearly articulating parameters of acceptable behaviour and desirable action within the organisation.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section form a brief summary based on issues raised in the context of this paper. To that extent they are limited, as they do not venture into the broader areas of diversity (as noted in the introduction) or into the complex dimensions of intersectionality. Nevertheless, they do provide some suggestions to address the issues raised in this paper.

Recruitment

In terms of recruitment, organisations need to begin with rigorous statistics that show the trends in attracting, retaining, and promoting different groups in the organisational community, including gender statistics. Statistics act as an effective tool for change that is evidenced based and factual. Reporting of these statistics at the institutional level and to external agencies for external benchmarking helps develop institutional and comparative understanding, leading (hopefully) to change.

Setting targets for women in recruitment and shortlisting is another recommendation that could have impact, especially in relation to women in leadership roles. Setting targets or quotas was not canvassed in the context of this paper (a contentious topic) but targets are a good starting point for the process of recruitment. Addressing the gender pipeline of potential candidates is yet another recommendation for recruitment of female candidate across the disciplines and sectors.

Leadership and Accountability

A powerful driver in the search and striving for gender based improvements is leadership. There is ample evidence to suggest that where leaders become involved and set the gender equity agenda, change occurs more rapidly. All leaders should take responsibility for and engage in:

- Unconscious bias training
- Interview and shortlisting training
- Tracking key metrics and setting targets for gender equity
- Understanding the gender pipeline and creating appropriate career paths and opportunities for women;
- Monitor trends in the promotion of women with regular reports (perhaps build into the KPIs for senior managers)

Cultural Change

Cultural change requires building an organisational culture that is accepting of change and that is inclusive and supportive of women across all disciplines and sectors of employment, especially as leaders. Initiatives could include:

- Identifying champions of change in respective disciplines and sectors;
- Investing in leadership development for women as researchers and managers;
- Appointing mentors and creating opportunities for women to shadow leaders and act in senior / management roles e.g. Head of School, Department etc.;
- Identifying and training gatekeepers of cultural diversity and inclusion (e.g. Senior executives), responsible for creating an environment that values and respects diversity;
- Providing training for personal and professional development (e.g. Women in Leadership Program) and allocating resources e.g. promotions portal: tools, information, networking; sponsorships and coaching;
- Ensuring policies are in place and are implemented to promote workplace diversity and inclusion.

Some organisations seek to integrate their diversity agenda by having a diversity role in the HR portfolio and making changes to HR policies and practices. However, developing cultural change is more than an HR function alone and requires much more engagement of the organisation.

A Diversity Culture

Organisations create and sustain social and professional networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. These factors

effectively enhance or deplete the cultural milieu of an organisation. Managing diversity needs to incorporate the values, attitudes and expectations of the entire organisation. Researchers such as Sabharwal (2014) and Hur (2013) note that building a diversified workforce and then not managing that diversity is fruitless. It is argued that managing diversity requires an organisational wide transformation, and that simply converting policies, practices and language to gender-neutral formats is insufficient unless organisational cultures are tackled (Hanappi-Egger, 2012). A collective approach is required in taking advantage of cultural and socio-linguistic capabilities of staff, which rewards and acknowledges diversity of experience, recognises potential in reaching measurable outcomes, changes expectations and attitudes, and creates a more even playing field.

This collective approach is required not only to ensure that all employees reach their potential and contribute to the institution equally, but as argued in the McKinsey Report (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2015), there is the broader contribution to the economy and GDP. It was found that seventy four per cent of companies responded that gender diversity was a top priority of their CEO, but less than half of the staff in these companies believed this to be the case. Culturally responsive leadership is required, that is, where the practices and philosophies assure that women feel valued and included. The absence of such leadership leads to an outcome where women in senior ranks are often disillusioned with their careers, which works against creating an environment that fosters 'women in leadership' (Lopez, 2014).

The main responsibility for facilitating a diversity valued culture lies with senior management - from the overarching strategy, cascaded through to operational strategies (Cole & Salimath, 2013). Further, it is imperative that the execution and evaluation of a corporate diversity strategy employs a planned change approach, to not only acknowledge and value diversity, but also systematically include diversity into the organisation's corporate culture.

Conclusion

Addressing the many issues that are intertwined in the topic of 'overcoming barriers to gender equity in the workplace' is a complex task. This paper has sought to comment on and explore just some of the key issues and possible approaches to managing them, in order to develop an organisational culture that equitably seeks to recruit, support and retain women in their careers and in leadership roles. Feedback from The IAFOR International Conference on Global Studies suggested that there is an even more complex dimension that should be further explored - that of the gender equity in emerging economies and developing countries, a topic to be addressed in future research directions.

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