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How Ethical is Gender Equality in Leadership?

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Abstract

We are facing a completely different global crisis and it has added to the existing inequalities for women in leadership. Organizations need to develop ethical campaigns to encourage leaders to eradicate disparities between women and men in the workforce. Recent data shows that job insecurity is higher for women in EU due to the COVID-19 pandemic and female leaders may face new barriers in gender stereotypes in the future. Companies have a moral responsibility to reflect on gender inequality and to provide equal employment opportunities.

Keywords: ethics, gender equality, leadership, women, COVID-19, diversity

Introduction

Historically, women have faced various degrees of inequality – from what jobs they are allowed and not allowed to work, not being allowed to vote, violence and more.

Women's careers are continuing to suffer due to maternal leave and childcare-related topics while men are rarely burdened by these issues.

While we have seen gender equality take a front seat in public debate and politics in the past decade, there is still much left to be done before women have the same opportunities as men.

A year since the pandemic started, general lockdowns, work from home, schools & kindergartens being closed, female leaders have been facing even more challenges. Creating a more balanced culture, compatible with family life will be an immense challenge for our leaders and I consider that an empathetic view will be the solution to move forward.

In the following pages I'll dive deeper into views regarding gender discrimination, equality in leadership positions, the impact of Covid-19 in gender ethics and how the future of work will affect women and their careers.

Forms and gender discrimination

The most debated gender equality issue is the pay gap between women and men. In 2015, the World Economic Forum highlighted that "women today earn what men were earning ten years ago" (Cann, 2015). Moreover, the European Union states that "In 2019, women's gross hourly earnings were on average 14.1% below those of men in the EU" (Eurostat, 2021).

The European Commission treats these problems beyond the discrimination and take in consideration 4 points that women face in regard to work, rewards and advancement (European Commission, n.d.):

1. Sectoral segregation – this means that the pay gap can be explained by the over representation of women in low paying sectors (ex: education, care) added on top of the over representation of men present in better paid sectors (ex: technology, STEM, engineering)
2. Work-life balance – flexible working time adequate to childcare
3. The glass ceiling – the position of women in the organization hierarchy influence the pay level
4. Discrimination – women can earn less than men for doing the same type of job

More recently, a study called "State of Gender Pay Gap 2020" suggested that "last year women earned 81 cents to every dollar earned by their male counterparts" (Ruiz, 2021). The same study also reveals that women are often more often penalized after significant absence at work, when compared to their male counterparts. At the same time, qualified women trying to re-enter organizations have difficulties to negotiate salaries or to achieve job offers immediately.

Additionally, organizational culture can have unintended consequences, like maternity leave and childcare activities being frowned upon – but this can change by offering similar possibilities (paternity leave, childcare leave) to men. This, in turn, will improve women representation - when men have the possibility to take time off for family reasons, women can be at work and improve their chances of promotion and participate in the talent pool.

Women talent needs to be present in the work environment and companies must create the right policies to encourage women to perform their best.

To add to the pay gap and organizational stresses, for millions of women, daily life reality consists of unpaid work. Unpaid work is „work performed in the home, like childcare or others forms of caregiving, cooking, cleaning, and errands done by a family member who’s not being paid” (Gates, 2019). Research has shown that there is no country where the gap between women and men is zero. According to Melinda Gates, „the unpaid work a woman does in the home is a barrier to the activities that can advance here – getting more education...unequal unpaid work blocks a woman’s path to empowerment” (Gates, 2019). The solution to this is as simple as it is far from becoming a reality – share household activities equally and act as partners.

The fourth aspect keeping women from being true equals to men consists of sexual harassment in the workplace.

#MeToo movement started with a female employee at Uber that wrote a blog post about her abuse. The movement uncovered deep sexism existing in Silicon Valley but also other industries while the #MeToo movement became viral around the world and women everywhere shared their stories and started finding their voices. 54% of women report workplace harassment. Being sexual harassed can impact women’s development and psychological health. They can face decreasing job satisfaction, lose new opportunities or promotions, experience drops in work performance due to physical stress or hostile performance evaluation.

Organizations need to respond with the right approach by having a harassment policy that is regularly reviewed, regular trainings promoting a positive culture that doesn’t tolerate harassment and discussing about this topic openly, even if there are no complaints.

Last, but not least, violence against women is responsible for the fact that “about 50 women lose their lives to domestic violence every week in the EU and this has increased during lockdown” (European Parliament, 2021). It seems that the restrictions, encouraged violence, making it harder for female victims to get help.

According to the World Health Organization, “1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence” (World Health Organization, 2021). This can also have a negative effect on the

pay gap and women's ability to perform in the workplace and constitutes an enormous socio-economical cost.

Women facing violent abuses have shown an inability to participate in work, they are isolated and often lose their jobs. The social economic cost are enormous and have impact on all organization. Women face inability participation on work, isolation, loss of wages and even the job.

Women in leadership position

Traditionally, men are the ones that promote into leadership roles – this can also be noticed in private enterprises since – „only 5% of FTSE 100 CEO's (chief executive officers) and 7% of word leaders are women in 2020" (Ohr, 2020) – making women a minority of the managerial population. Globally, a recent survey revealed that „just 5% of over 3000 companies across 56 countries had female CEO's in 2019" (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2019).

History, however, has given us notable female leaders that can tackle challenging tasks with great success: Cleopatra, Elizabeth 1, Margaret Thatcher and the latest brave woman leading has been Angela Merkel.

The global health crisis demonstrated the power that women can have in politics through the following key figures: New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinta Ardern, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Finland's Prime Minister Sanna Marin, Barbado's Prime Minister Mia Mottley – „They have all been especially successful in fighting the coronavirus and saving the lives of their citizen – a case study in women's leadership for years to come" (Morse, 2020).

While women only represent 8% of global political leaders, they have accounted for roughly 40% of the most successful campaigns against COVID-19. (Ellis, 2020)

In order for women to take control of their careers, I believe there are 7 essential steps (Monroe, 2018):

A. Find a mentor - a mentor can help guide women, teach them the values of authentic leadership, offer encouragement, help maximise their potential and empower them

B. Speak up Early – women are more often afraid to speak up in meetings due to a lack of confidence. In reality, all perspectives are valuable and, in order to be noticed, women need to start sharing their opinions, asking questions and be comfortable putting questions in a larger meetings

C. Be professional to everyone – to be taken seriously women need to remain composed and polite in every situation

D. Resilience – women need to support each other when they're passing leadership crisis, in this way, every failure will help them build resilience and they will learn new ways of acting

E. Work Hard and Smart – women need to stay out of office politics by producing great results that communicate their successes inside the entire organization

F. Trust their abilities – having faith in their abilities and capacities

G. Ask for opportunities – often women wait to be given an opportunity rather than ask for them; they need to take control of their careers and not be intimidated by the process of asking for what they want

Organizations need to stop identifying leadership styles with gender as this perpetuates gender stereotypes. Allowing individuals to lead in their own way and learn from their mistakes helps eradicate disparities between men and women in the workplace.

In the end, „gender equality is a basic human right, and for this reason, all companies should integrate it into their day-to-day work and business management” (Medina-Vicent, 2014). Therefore, it's necessary for organizations to include women in all groups, promote dialogue, connection and integrate them in day-to-day business.

Ethic movements after COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has come with a lot of negative aspects for everyone, and women have been disproportionately negatively affected. However, M. Gates believes that „this is how we can emerge from the pandemic in all of its dimensions: by recognizing that women are not just victims of a broken world; they can be architects of a better one” (Ellis, ‘Building Forward Better’ – Why Women’s Leadership Matters During COVID-19 and Beyond, 2020).

The stage is set to give women equal opportunity to become valued and recognized leaders in the recovery and building of a more inclusive economy:

- governments need to create and promote economic autonomy policies for supporting women;
- private organizations have to ensure that women are included in the leadership recruiting process and hire more female staff in key roles; developing policies that recognize the difference in requirements between women and men;
- civil society needs to recognize women economic aspirations and engage men to support women leaders in organizations;
- all of us need to see women beyond traditional models of partnership - building a culture that encourages women to make strategic decisions.

A report from McKinsey & Co suggests that while women make up 39% of global employment, they actually account for 54% of overall job losses. Specialists suggest that the effect of the pandemic might set women back an entire generation.

The financial implications of such a setback are not small either, being estimated that if the trend continues, by the end of the pandemic, global GDP will decrease by \$1 trillion by 2030.

In the end, taking action and improving gender equality will benefit us all, not only women. (Ruiz, Covid-19 And Gender Equality: Employers Can Help Women From Being Unfairly Punished For Challenges They Face, 2021)

The pandemic has created job insecurity for millions of people worldwide. However, women are also severely more impacted than men given that around 30% of women work part-time in the informal economy, having fewer labour rights and basic benefits. (European Parliament, 2021)

Some companies may see the pandemic as an excuse to slow down their efforts for diversity and inclusion since we still seem to associate leadership with masculine features (McClennan, 2019). It seems that, in fact, organizations that understand the fact that women tend to handle crises better, will be preparing themselves for future success (West, 2020).

Future of work

Covid will definitely impact the near future of work as Vice President Kamala Harris drew attention to the economic crisis that the 2.5 million women who have left or lost their jobs during the pandemic: „our economy cannot fully recover unless women can participate fully...it is a national emergency”. Her hope is that the administration’s relief plan can help in this regard. It’s clear, however, that the pandemic has intensified the disparities between women and men that already existed (Rogers, 2021).

The pandemic has also highlighted a couple of other of key terms describing the medium-term future of work (Castrillon, 2021):

1. **Balanced** – many women already faced remote work combined with childcare and household duties and this made them more resilient and taught their employees that they are able to properly balance their duties;
2. **Remote** – organizations are thinking more about remote work in the future and women have a great opportunity to remain in the workforce even while handling childcare related activities;
3. **Flexible** – many women adjust their careers for family therefore flexible career options will help organizations to not lose talented women any longer;
4. **Authenticity** – leads women to higher job satisfaction and better performance; authenticity will also align the disparities between men and women leadership styles;
5. **Entrepreneurial** – women will have control of their careers by running their own business (a number that has increased by 114% over the past 2 decades)

In the long term however, work is going through a radical transformation as data usage empowers automation technologies to spread further. While this can negatively impact women, it also brings new opportunities, especially in growing sectors such as healthcare. Given the barriers for women in tech, these opportunities will not be easily reached but they will be there, nonetheless (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019).

Conclusion

Gender inequality is real and the pandemic has brought up some of the worst aspects of it: increased violence, increased unpaid work, more women leaving the workforce, slowed down inclusion initiatives in companies and more.

While transitioning to gender equality is happening, it's still slow. In the private sector, companies need to ensure that they reduce the pay gap, create more opportunities for women and give men the same parental benefits as they offer women. These three will have ripple effects for diversity & inclusion in companies as well as positive effects for the worldwide economy. Also, applying ethical principles when deciding benefits and pay can help turn gender equality into a reality sooner rather than later.

As more company boards are realizing that leadership styles based on transformational, empathetic values serve everyone better in the long run – women have a clear advantage over men who are viewed as being more aggressive values that don't always promote transparency and communication. We're transitioning to a meaning-based economy and women are ready to pick up the baton and lead everyone in the right direction.

Governments and political parties should also do a better job at recognizing talented women with leadership potential in order to use their specific skills for the better. Continuing investments for women in STEM is also a key factor in preparing women for the future of work and automation.

Women are and have been ready to lead for a while. It's about time they got an equal chance at that.

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