



## **Gender Inequality in the Workplace: A Future for Women at the Top**

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### ***Introduction***

In the past, women have been recognizably deemed inferior to men on almost all accounts, especially when it has come to work. Previously it was believed that women would gain social position from the men in their lives. This stems from the fact that until quite recently, a women's role was solely to bear children and be a suitable wife. Their commitment to paid employment was viewed as secondary to their other role obligations. However, these traditional roles have begun to break down and now, women tend to seek paid employment for the duration of their lives. In the present day, two income households are an integral aspect of family status. Despite these changes, the gap between men and women in the workplace has persisted in numerous sectors. Resulting in fewer work-related opportunities for women, a narrower scope of jobs, and less pay than their counterparts (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979, p. 235).

Several theories have been brought forward to elucidate the barriers women face in the employment sector, as well as provide explanations for these barriers and incentives for the future pursuit of equity in the workplace. Although current evidence indicates the need for vast changes to be made, I hypothesize that with the right strategies and initiatives implemented, as well as a heightened understanding of why gender inequality remains an issue, the workplace can continually progress into a more equal and inclusive environment for women. An environment whereby they can receive adequate training, equal opportunities, fair treatment, and same pay. There is a future for women at the top.

### ***Literature Review***

In a study conducted by Clerkin (2016), of 745 women and men, it was concluded that recruiting women into your organization not only translated into an amiable workplace environment, it also increased financial performance. Finding that, "500 companies with the highest representation of women on boards financially outperform companies with the lowest representation of women on boards". As well, contrary to public opinion, the study found that

teams consisting of all genders had higher profits compared to teams that were male dominated, exemplifying that women are a viable aspect of an efficient organization whom employers should seek to hire. Clerkin also found that a higher percentage of women in an organization predicted greater job satisfaction, decreased burnout, more meaningful work as well as organizational dedication. Even when considering factors such as participant age, industry, organization size, leadership level, ethnicity and gender the same conclusion persisted, that “having more women in your organization might actually make your organization a better place to work” (Clerkin, 2016).

## ***Barriers***

Despite the findings of Clerkin’s study, many researchers have concluded that although progress has been made regarding inequalities in the workplace, “gender equality is still not achieved as men and women are not represented and are not treated equally in the workplace” (Michailidis et.al., 2012). In modern day, women are well educated, yet continually forced into a narrow range of occupations, where there is less responsibility, lower pay and limited opportunity to advance (Michailidis et.al., 2012). Research has shown that this discriminatory behavior is often a result of one of three factors. Firstly, because women are seemingly less qualified “in their training, intermittent patterns of employment, their lack of commitment, and inability to travel due to family situations” (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979, p. 236). Secondly, individuals with the power to promote or hire often restrict females based on their attitudes about women's abilities. Lastly, many women view themselves as incapable of assuming authoritative positions due to their lack of socialization in leadership roles (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979). Women are highly capable beings whom society has constructed into fragile caregivers with the historical belief a woman's only job is to “mirror the sex role behavior functional to the family” (Mayes, 1979, p. 557). These beliefs have since translated into a number of barriers for women seeking equal employment opportunities such as “gender discrimination, the glass ceiling effect, stereotypes, work-life balance, lack of mentoring, conflicting roles and pay inequality” (Michailidis et.al., 2012).

## ***Explanations***

Over the years, researchers have put forth numerous explanations for these discrepancies between men and women in the employment sector. One explanation being the behaviors and attitudes of men (Essig & Sopranot, 2019, p. 374). Studies show that in many cases, men do not recognize gender inequality. Having not experienced the barriers women do, men fail to recognize their own gender as “privileged or distinctive”, unintentionally widening the gap. (Essig & Sopranot, 2019, p. 374). Generally, studies have focused on helping women achieve greater equality. Perhaps, “changes among men represent the next phase of the movement”. Moving forward it is important that men understand their role in gender inequality if women are to ever achieve complete equity (Essig & Sopranot, 2019, p. 374).

A second suggested explanation for the persistent barriers women face when seeking equality in work stems from a study on the work-family narrative. This study explains that

stagnation in women's gains is a direct result of a woman's family obligations conflicting with the long hours of a professional job. Women are assumed responsible for their children's needs, more so than men. This assumption is then seen by employers as women having dual-responsibility, meaning they are likely less devoted to their practice or less available to work. As a result women are subject to part time work with smaller wages and the representation of women in senior level positions remains thin (Padavic, et al., 2019). This is exemplified by the statement "men with children earn about 2% more on average than men without children, according to the GAO findings, whereas women with children earn about 2.5% less than women without children" (Stanberry & Aven, 2013).

Another presumed explanation for the lack of equity amongst women and men in the workplace is stereotyping. In a study conducted by Mayes on Women in positions of authority, it was found that men view women in higher positions as manipulative, devious, inhumane, and power hungry. The males response to female authority was characterized by hostility, and the men refused to cooperate with their female superiors, stating they "feel uncomfortable with the female activism" (Mayes, 1979). It was later discovered that the men in the study insisted that women in general were supposed to be supportive, expressive, warm and caring beings. Aligning with historical beliefs that a woman's primary role is to tend to her husband and children (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979, p. 235). Furthermore, implying that women are incapable of holding authoritative positions where assertiveness is an asset.

A study by Stamarski and Hing outlines the issues of gender inequality in the workplace at fault of human resources (HR). The policies and decisions made by HR directly affect an organization's training, hiring, pay and promotion of women. Through the use of leadership, structure, strategy, culture and climate HR is responsible for implementing gender inequality practices that allow for the discrimination of women (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Stamarski and Hing (2015) provide us with the example:

Organizational members receive both formal and informal messages about gender inequality—or equality—within an organization through their orientation and training, reading of organizational policy, perceptions of who rises in the ranks, how women (vs. men) are treated within the organization, as well as their perception of climates for diversity and sexual harassment. Socialization of organizational members over time has been shown to result in organizational members' values and personalities changing to better match the values of the organization.

When you work for a company or an organization, your standards begin to align with theirs. If HR implements practices whereby women are seemingly lesser than men, you will adapt this ideology into your personality and behave accordingly. If women are to achieve equity, then HR policies and practices must align with strategies and incentives that aim to reduce the gap between genders in the workforce.

## ***Consequences***

Although these explanations offer reasoning as to why women continually experience workplace inequality, they do not explain or justify the consequences. For example, “The equal pay problem is insidious in nature because it is often not possible to explain or prove exactly why paycheck inequality still exists” (Stanberry and Aven, 2013, p. 93). Many people assume that unequal pay amongst genders is a result of qualifications, education, or experience, however, recent empirical studies have demonstrated that, “women make less money, even when holding the same or similar jobs, than their male counterparts” (Stanberry and Aven, 2013, p. 93). Despite the widespread general belief that there is continual progress towards gender equality, the persistent gap in workplace earnings confirms that a magnitude of perceived differences between men and women still exist (Stanberry and Aven, 2013, p. 95).

## ***Strategies and Incentives***

To counteract the numerous reasonings for why employment equity amongst men and women has not yet been established, researchers have proposed a number of strategies, incentives and policies that could possibly reduce the inequality gap moving forward. Firstly, studies show that women wish to be assisted by mentoring programs. Mentoring programs are capable of helping women identify and develop their potential, balance their work and family life, refresh those women re-entering the workforce, and help women broaden their professional experiences. A second suggested strategy is for companies to implement regulations that help minorities, such as women. By implementing and enforcing anti-discriminatory and equality legislation all individuals can receive the equal opportunities that they deserve and as a result women can gain equal representation in higher, more definitive positions (Michailidis et.al., 2012). This would then instill the belief that powerful female role models can exist, and are something worth becoming.

Complementary to this, another study by Stamarski and Son Hing (2015) suggests that, “although we portray gender inequality as a self-reinforcing system that can perpetuate discrimination, important levers for reducing discrimination [can be] identified.” One of these levers being to place women in key positions to indicate that the organization supports gender diversity. “Organizational members are likely to perceive that the climate for women is positive when women hold key positions in the organization” (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). A second lever suggested for reducing gender inequality is to create an inclusive organizational culture whereby opportunities are possible for all employees. For example, if an organizational culture is marked by gender inequality, “women may have lower hopes and expectations for promotion, and when they are discriminated against, may be less likely to imagine that they can appeal their outcomes” (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Ending gender inequality in an organization means removing any practices that currently promote inequalities, and replacing them with policies of acceptance, understanding and equal opportunity. Only then will women have the ability to showcase their talents, experience and education at the top while receiving the same respect current male employees do in positions of power.

In another study, Clerkin outlines a number of steps organizations and leaders can take in order to ensure equality in their workplace, and support their female employees. Firstly, when looking to hire a female, it is suggested to ensure your job descriptions and job interviews do not accidentally ostracize women. For example, using terms such as ‘dominant’ or ‘boastful’ might stray women away from applying for positions. Whereas terms such as ‘adaptable’ and ‘trustworthy’ are more gender neutral and imply the position is capable of being filled by any gender. Another suggestion made in the report is, “Organizations that want to fully leverage women’s leadership potential must both hire women leaders and also develop their frontline female employees so they can lead in the future” (Clerkin, 2016). An organization where women are supported is an organization where women will want to work. This, as previously mentioned, will result in greater job satisfaction, less burnout, more meaningful work and increased financial gain (Clerkin, 2016). Women are an asset to the workforce, and their contributions cannot be overlooked.

## ***Conclusion***

Over the years, inequality amongst women and men in the workplace has diminished, but has not yet disappeared. Two income households have become increasingly normalized and it is now common for both males and females to seek paid employment. However, despite this modernization, women still experience a number of unequal employment issues stemming from historical perspectives on the role of women. These barriers consist of difficulty advancing in the workplace, stereotyping, unequal pay, a narrowed scope of job opportunities, current HR practices and policies as well as negative attitudes (Wolf & Fligstein, 1979, p. 235).

After further research, it has become clear that these issues could be lessened or resolved by implementing strategies, such as, mentoring programs, flexibility for family needs, anti-discriminatory legislation for women and minorities entering the workforce and HR policies that implement gender equality practices. Although the wage gap has persisted despite ongoing improvements in the different sectors of gender inequality, it is important to first address the barriers presumably responsible for the majority of discrepancies. The current attitudes and behaviors directed towards women in work need modifications if the goal is to move towards a more equal employment sector overall. Then, through application of these strategies alongside a greater understanding of gender inequality, we will have the means necessary to shrink the gap between men and women in the workforce. A scenario where women have equal opportunity to men in the workplace should no longer be an aspiration, but a requirement.

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