

Original Article

Gender Equality in Academia, Business, Technology and Health Care: A WomEnPower view in Cyprus

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the findings of a qualitative study aiming at understanding women's perceptions with regard to a) gender equality at workplace; b) experiences at workplace with regard to gender; c) gender wage gap; d) use of technology for addressing issues of inequality and e) suggestions for the development of an e-mentoring community platform.

This study sketches the current situation of gender equality in the fields of academia, business, technology and health care, and provides deep understanding of the difficulties that women with different levels of experience and expertise encounter in their workplace as well as how technology could help them overcome these issues. Data collected demonstrate a variety of challenges faced by women in workplace as well as the need for role models that will allow young women to overcome the stereotypical woman profile as excluded from economic, political and professional life.

Key words: Gender, technology, discrimination, empowerment, perceptions, qualitative

Introduction

Gender inequality can be defined as the lack of “discrimination in relation to opportunities, allocation of resources or benefits and access to services for women or men” (Elwer et al., 2012, p.1). In all EU Member States, female employment rates are lower than those for males. When employment is measured in full-time equivalent, the picture is even worse (OECD, 2012).

Despite the efforts made for shrinking the gap between men and women, the underrepresentation of women in higher positions still exists. Across the European economy women earn on average 16.4% less than men, whilst in USA working women earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men (EU Equality Challenge Unit, 2014; Smith, 2014; Bryant et al., 2015). Neyer et al. (2013b) conceptualize gender equality beyond “sameness

of distribution”, providing three dimensions of gender inequality related to employment, economic resources and the division of housework and family care. Gender equality is achieved when one is able to access and enjoy the same resources, opportunities and rewards regardless their gender (Workplace, Gender Equality Agency, Australian Government, 2013). This is a complex matter, involving economical, demographic and behavioral factors that may contribute to increase gender-based gaps in the labor market (ILO, 2012). The newly adopted UN agenda for 2030 highlights the importance of women's empowerment in employment, salaries and working environment as a basic human right (UN news center, 2015).

Research studies demonstrated that women suffer from low rates of participation in the workforce, decision making and unequal value of their work (Monroe, et al. 2008; Loscocco & Bird, 2012;

Blackburn, Jarman, & Racko, 2015). Yet, missing women from professional careers affects both the workforce, as it misses women's perspective and expertise; and women themselves. Further, most technology is designed by men and one need to consider that technology then reflects those who make it (IGNITE, 2014).

Despite the emphasis given in high level political decisions for encouraging women to reach equality, researchers and practitioners often lack understanding of women's perspective with regard to gender equality and value of their work. This paper aims at portraying the current situation in gender inequality by taking a snapshot on the way women experience and ascribe meaning to it in the fields of academia, business, technology and health care. The paper presents a qualitative study that brought together women from different areas of work with different levels of experience to voice their views regarding to the status of women in their work area, obstacles that they encounter as well as how they perceive technology as a means for overcoming obstacles in their professional development. Authors provide an overview of the state-of-the art of gender equality in the workforce; methodology follows. The article concludes by linking the empirical results to the existing literature.

Gender equality in the workforce

The under-representation of women in high-ranked positions is a pattern that occurs across several occupations across the globe including health care, academia, entrepreneurship, business; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). Although the number of women in authority positions increases, there is still a continuation of discrimination and women experience with regard to downplaying (Monroe et al. 2008). Loscocco and Bird (2012) demonstrated that women are more likely to work in part time works because of childcare, so there is a limited chance to have a director position due to reduced work's hours. According to Kogut et al. (2014) this is the case in Norway, where, one woman to seven men holds a director position and a percentage of 20% retain structural equality. As indicated by Beede et al. (2011, p. 1), "although women fill close to half of all jobs in the U.S. economy, they hold less than 25 percent of STEM jobs. This has been the case throughout the past decade, even as college educated women have increased their share of

the overall workforce". Similarly, recent research evidence points systemic gender discrimination and inequality in health workforce. Health care professionals' work is traditionally associated to femininity as women constitute the majority of health care workers (WHO, 2002; 2008), yet women's salary in such positions is devaluated in the labor market (Tijdens, De Vries & Steinmetz, 2013). As pointed out by Newman (2014) more attention needs to be paid by governance and human resource for health (HRH) leaders on understanding inequality in the health care domain. Newman (2014) provides a number of specific actions to be carried out which include a unified conceptual framework for gender inequality in the health workforce, research guidance and improvement of HRH policies and practices.

Women's representation in the workforce is decisive to a country's social, economic and innovation competitiveness. Higher capacity innovation, financial and political growths are amongst the benefits reported for drawing policies that promote equal opportunities. It is a rather constricted view to believe that increase of women's participation in workforce will reveal novel economic and political growth. However, encouraging and supporting women in the organizational agenda will allow for a different perspective to be heard in social, political and economic discussions.

Womenpower platform

In an attempt to give women a voice in the arena of workplace, Womenpower (WE-ME) was developed. Womenpower is a community platform aiming to connect different generations of women for addressing issues related to women equality in workplace. It embarks to assist young women to receive support and solidarity from women with expertise in their area. Ultimately, through Womenpower a network of women will be developed that will enable women to join forces for achieving their goals.

For the development of Womenpower platform a user-centered design (UCD) approach was followed which aspired to contribute towards a user-friendly system that will encourage young women to receive support for breaking the unseen barriers in their professional development, and eventually reach higher levels in the corporate ladder. UCD is a framework for hardware and software development that ensures maximum involvement of key players (Norman

& Draper, 1986). Thus, users will be an integral part of any software or hardware development.

For the development of Womenpower platform the research engaged in state-of-the-art-research in the area of gender equality in academia, business, technology and health care. Data from research manuscripts formed an interview protocol that was used for elucidating information from women in lower and higher ranks in academia, health care, technology and business throughout three focus groups that were held (Chen et al., 2013; Elwer et al., 2012; Ding et al., 2006) These data enabled the research team to depict the current situation in academia, business and health care as well as to elucidate different views with regard to the use of technology for mentoring and support. Mentoring provides opportunities for women for professional development as well as personal achievements (Mentoring Women's Network, 2015). Moreover, building on women's views, a working prototype of the platform was developed that enabled users to provide feedback on how the e-mentoring platform would work (Parmaxi & Vasiliou, 2015).

Methodology

Study Design

To gain an in-depth understanding of participants' views of the role of women in the workplace a qualitative methodology was employed.

Sampling

Three focus groups were implemented. The focus groups involved both women in senior and junior positions in the areas of academia, business and health care. Three focus groups took place, two with junior participants (focus group 1, n=10; focus group 2, n=6) and one with senior participants (focus group 3, n= 8). The aim was for all four workplaces (health care, academia, business and technology) to be represented in both senior and junior participants. A convenience sample was used. Participants were recruited through researchers' personal and professional contacts with key people in these fields. Researchers contacted the interviews though did not know the participants personally and no conflicting interest or relation existed.

Participants' ages and career stage varied among the groups. The inclusion criteria were the participants to be females, from the fields of

business, health care, academia and technology. In addition for seniors to have a managerial, decision making position for more than 5 years. Moreover, for the junior participants other criteria were to enter the profession the past 5 years and not to have a managerial or an authority position.

Tool

A focus group guide was designed based on the literature review (Ritchie, 2013). The following thematic areas were revealed: a) gender equality at workplace; b) experiences at workplace with regard to gender; c) gender wage gap; d) use of technology for addressing issues of inequality and e) suggestions for the development of an e-mentoring community platform.

Data Collection

The focus groups were conducted in three different dates in agreement with participants. All authors facilitated the focus group discussion; two authors participated in each discussion. Each focus group lasted approximately 60-80 minutes. The facilitators followed the focus group guide with the thematic areas mentioned above. Discussion was recorded with the permission of the participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed in order to extract key themes related to the areas mentioned earlier. Although thematic analysis is generally understood as an analytic technique used in the context of different qualitative methodological approaches e.g. grounded theory, phenomenology etc., it can also be used independently as a flexible method of analyzing qualitative data guiding the search for themes or patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further, this kind of research involves that the research team studies the data in their natural settings in order to interpret the results and ascribe meaning to them to make sense (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, 2009). The analysis was based on six thematic analysis steps: Familiarizing researcher with data, generating codes, searching for themes and reviewing themes, defining themes and produce the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The recorded focus groups were transcribed verbatim by the research team. To guide the systematic analysis the topics guiding the interviews were used thematic categories. Data were repeatedly read and no other categories were developed.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the research study in person verbally and in writing. Each participant signed a consent form. It was also explained that participants had the right to withdraw at any time of the study. During the focus groups all principles of Belmont report were followed and applied. The principles of confidentiality, anonymity and personal data were also taken in consideration.

Results

Data collected indicated similarities as well as discrepancies between women in different areas and different years of expertise. Figure 1 provides an overview of the stances voiced by participants in the areas of gender equality at workplace, experiences at workplace in regards to gender, gender wage gap, and use of technology. Participants in mentors' focus group expressed similar views regarding gender equality articulating equal opportunities in their workplace. On the other hand, junior participants from the field of health care had a different view of gender equality at workplace. In the following section we present the analysis of the data categorised in the five areas mentioned earlier: Gender equality at workplace, experience at workplace in regards to gender, gender wage gap and the use of technology for addressing gender equality issues.

1. Gender equality at workplace

Most of the participants in the senior focus group expressed similar views with regard to gender equality. They stated that they were given equal opportunities and employers did not discriminate due to gender. However, it was noted from some senior participants the general feeling and experience that sometimes things are not as equal as they seem.

"It is obvious that our directors believes that men can do better management than us."
(Participant health - senior 3)

Junior participants from the health field had a different view of gender equality at workplace.

2. Experiences at workplace in regards to gender

Participants from the senior focus group expressed the influence of Cypriot culture at

work place in association to gender equality. A senior participant from the field of business expressed the feeling that Cypriot societal and cultural influences are strong and men hold most managerial positions.

"... I realized that as a woman I could never hold a managerial position. I think that our society is one of the communities in which men are thought to be remarkable and capable enough to hold managerial positions."
(Participant business - senior 3)

Junior participants agreed that there is inequality at workplace, however there was a strong discussion with regard to woman's role at work and family. The "glass ceiling" appears in the Cypriot society, as women seem incapable of reaching high level positions in their workplace. In such a society, unseen barriers prevent women to claim higher positions. For example, a junior participant from the field of business noted that in a company aiming at the greatest possible profit, men are preferred since women are more emotional and may not be able to cope with difficult situations or hard decisions. Sometimes, even women employers are been more suspicious towards women employees.

"...Every problem we have with machines we are looking for a man to fix it. We find a male colleague to do it...we believe that we are not good in engineering. And I wonder if women do not have the inclination to technology or if we prefer not to deal with."
(Participant health - junior 10)

Participants seemed to agree that women face challenges at work, however in a different degree.

"I often feel that not only my boss, but staff also, expect me to do something more to prove my abilities to manage difficult tasks ..."
(Participant business- senior 3)

Participants also voiced pregnancy as a barrier that women need to address in their workplace:

"In some cases if you are pregnant and you take sick leaves/time off for breastfeeding the baby, they will fire you...or cut off a large part of your salary...There are companies that have in their requirements that the woman needs to sign that she will not get pregnant for 3 years."
(Participant health - junior 11)

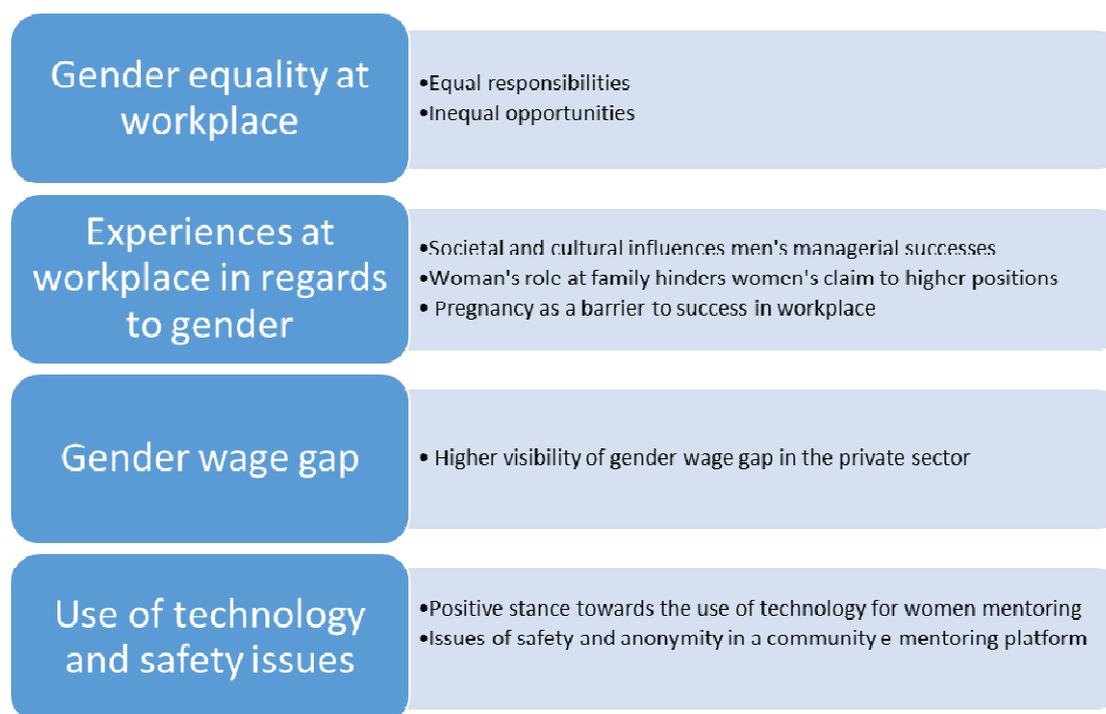


Figure 1. Overview of the stances voiced by participants in the areas of gender equality at workplace, experiences at workplace in regards to gender, gender wage gap, and use of technology.

3. Gender wage gap

Participants from all groups expressed contradicting views with regard to women's earnings vis-à-vis men's. Moreover, different experiences were revealed between women working in public vis-à-vis private sector. For women in private sector gender inequality and wage gap was more visible in their workplace.

"...I have a salary difference (less 20%) from my male colleagues" (Participant business - senior 1- private sector)

4. Use of technology and safety issues

With regard to the use of technology for developing a community e-mentoring platform, all participants demonstrated a positive stance. Controversies arose for issues of anonymity, safety and privacy. Participants in the senior group unanimously agreed that they would prefer being anonymous on the platform. Participants from the technology industry indicated that there must be a name to increase credibility - pseudonym. There is a possibility to have a list of mentors, but mentors to be anonymous. Mentoring can be take place both publicly or privately -starting from the platform and then expanding to the real world. All participants

were struggling in regards to the fact that Cyprus is a small society and most people know each other and this may influence their work.

Cultural underpinnings need to be taken into account, as culture is deeply embedded and difficult to be reformed. Although improvements have been made, still very few women are in decision making positions. According to Cuddy et al. (2010) culture can shape the contents of gender stereotypes.

Discussion

Despite the growing social and political effort to establish gender equality women still experience inequality in their professional development. There are many to be done yet. Some of the obstacles in effective pursuit of gender mainstreaming and equality policies include limited accountability mechanisms in public agencies, lack of awareness on the different effect that policies may have on men and women and lack of an effective monitoring system in evaluating gender equality initiatives and actions (OECD, 2012). All these need to have a good coordination system as to have a useful and meaningful result.

In this study, there are similarities but also differences in the views amongst the groups. However, in principle there is an agreement that gender inequality exists in many sectors and within daily life in Cyprus. It seems that women who work in the public sector have experienced less gender inequality compared to those working in the private sector. This is understandable in regards to payment as public sector has payment scales with no gender differentiation. In private sector, although scales may exist, the employer may alter salaries based on different arguments such as productivity, years of experience, education and so on.

Reconciling family and work is an urgent need to be applied in the Cyprus context. Considering gender and employment puzzle, tensions between family and work life consist the heart of it (OECD, 2012). Neyer et al. (2013a) noted that mothers often come across difficult dilemmas and need to choose between maintaining their job and having another child. Parenthood is one of the main factors underlying the gender employment gaps. In most EU Member States, the employment rate for women who have children is much lower than for women without children; while this is the opposite for men (OECD, 2012). Cyprus social welfare support is almost nonexistence in regards to family friendly policies such as provision of part time jobs in public sector, working from home, nurseries at workplace. This becomes more difficult with women in more needs such as single parent families, where women are the majority in caring and providing for these families.

These actions enhance reconciliation of family and working life and allow women to be productive and take the chance of decision making and/or managerial positions. Further, strong and sustainable balanced economic growth can be achieved by promoting and improving female working opportunities (OECD, 2012).

Findings in the Neyer et al. (2013a) study demonstrated that directors believe that women are more emotional and may not be able to cope with difficult situations or decisions. However, investing in women's leadership has essential effects on a country's Gross Domestic Product GDP and the welfare of next generations (Booz and Co, 2012). A research of 7280 leaders conducted by Zenger Folkman (2012) shows that women excel at most leadership competencies.

Women's ideas and business receive less start up investment and venture (IGNITE, 2014), while may provide creative and innovative approaches.

Ronblom et al. (2005) analyzed the gender mainstreaming in regional policies reported that due to economic growth they did not give senior positions to women.

It seems that the participants would like to use the technology and are positive for the development of a community platform that would bring together women mentors and mentees. This reinforces the usability of the platform. According to Kogut et al. (2014), the explosion of data nowadays through the use of social networks can improve the structural equality. Small changes can have big achievements that could be a remarkable improvement for women. With regard to safety and security issues, the senior group would like to have an anonymous profile while junior participants would like to know the name or at least the status/specialty of the mentor.

Overall, focus groups revealed that the platform will be useful to both groups of women- mentor and mentees. The senior group stated that the platform will respond to the needs of the participants to be available at home page with their qualifications. It will be important that questions from mentees to be accepted in both languages, Greek and English, otherwise a number of young women in need will be excluded.

Further, there is a need to express their thoughts, discuss the problems and challenges of women at workplace, and also success stories. As there is the chance of a foreign mentor or mentee, translation should be available and needs to be done probably by the research team considering gender and cultural sensitivity. Cultural norms and discriminatory social institutions often restrict the economic and social role of women worldwide (OECD, 2012).

In WomEmpower platform, all questions and answers need to be filtered by the platform's coordinator for reasons of anonymity, confidentiality and safety. It is important to note the women's willingness to advice and support other women in all sectors, in a professional and supportive manner. This highlights the felt need from mentees and mentors and at the same time recognizing the usefulness of such platform. The platform provides the mean to set the bases for a

productive and creative community of women and men at the same time.

Conclusion

Crossing the 21st century with no doubt there is gender inequality in workplace. Employers should be flexible, provide and support opportunities and initiatives at work regardless gender. Employers should provide equal opportunities and salaries for men and women. Empowering women to participate in all aspects of everyday life can achieve locally and globally agreed goals for development and sustainability in many aspects. This may improve the quality of life for women, men, families and consequently communities. Local policies and strategies need to be revisited and enhanced. The capacity of government needs to be strengthening in the application of gender responsive and sensitive approach throughout the local financial management starting from the public sector. There are many leading women figures in all sectors that can be used as paradigms and/or success stories. Within a time of economic crisis, women can have their chance and role. This is a collective benefit and needs to be seen as such-supporting gender equality is the adoption and implementation of a human right's principle-equality.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study cannot be generalized. The convenience sample used in forming the focus groups and the fact that participants represented three sectors only consist also a limitation.

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