

Gender equality in the workplace: a global perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – *The benefits of gender diversity in the workplace are well-established. Consequently, many organizations have policies or programs in place to encourage hiring women. Despite this, the gender gap remains, particularly in terms of compensation and promotion and progress appears slow. This paper aims to examine the benefits of gender diversity and common approaches to enhance it. It then reviews lessons from global research and suggests applications.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This practitioner study reviews the literature to identify arguments for gender equality in the workplace, progress in gender equality and common organizational approaches to equality. It presents snapshots of two global studies examining gender equality. It draws implications and applications from these studies.*

Findings – *Gender equality remains elusive and difficult to achieve despite efforts on the part of leaders to encourage it. Insights from research provide compelling reasons in terms of organizational outcomes for female hiring, development and promotion. Additionally, insights into organizational culture help leaders identify barriers to gender equality.*

Originality/value – *This paper presents insights into the need for and benefits of gender equality in organizations. A review of two global studies provides compelling reasons for leaders to recommit themselves to their gender equality and address needed changes in organizational culture.*

Keywords Gender equality, Organizational culture, Workplace diversity, Women's leadership

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Gender equality in the workplace is a goal for many organizations yet may be difficult to achieve. How effective are gender diversity policies and related workplace programs, and to what degree are goals and outcomes realized? Furthermore, how do policies, practices and achievements related to gender equality differ globally?

In the USA, the labor force consists of 52.7% men and 47.2% women ([Blackman, 2017](#)). Worldwide, however, women still have only 75% of the legal rights of men in the 190 economies monitored by the World Bank in spite of data reporting that 40 economies have made 62 gender-equality reforms since 2017 ([World Bank Group, 2020](#)). The World Bank monitors eight indicators focused on “women’s interactions with the law as they begin, progress through, and end their careers” (p. 5). These indicators, specifically, “Mobility, Workplace, Pay, Marriage, Parenthood, Entrepreneurship, Assets, and Pension” (p. 5), align with the economic decisions women make at various stages of their lives.

Specific to pay, in the USA, women experience an 18.5% wage gap compared to men for full-time, year-round workers ([Hegewisch et al., 2019](#)). In the two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the gender wage gap remained significant, particularly for Black and Hispanic women; 25% of Hispanic women and more than 20% of Black women are employed in service occupations, the occupational group with the lowest earnings, compared with 1% of White women and 0.9% White men ([Hegewisch and Mefferd, 2022](#)). Overall, women’s

full-time pay is less than men's in nearly all the top 20 most common jobs for women and all of the top 20 jobs for men. Similarly, women hold only 29.9% of executive positions in the US labor market ([Investopedia, 2021](#)).

This article first briefly reviews the benefits of diversity, specifically gender diversity and common approaches to enhance it. It then reviews global studies examining various aspects of gender diversity. Finally, it offers key takeaways.

Benefits of diversity

The benefits of diversity to companies across sectors are well-established and generally widely recognized. These include increased productivity and creativity, higher revenue, better employee engagement and loyalty, greater cultural insights and knowledge, a broad range of employee skill sets, decreased employee turnover, improved company reputation, enhanced competitive advantage and better results ([Andrade, 2020](#); [Zojceska, 2018](#)).

For gender diversity, specifically, research indicates two main categories of outcomes: justice gains and instrumental gains. The former entails results such as less sex discrimination and sexual harassment and the development of products and services that are not limited by a predominantly masculine point of view ([Fine et al., 2019](#)). Instrumental or organizational benefits include improved team and firm performance, increased innovation, occupational well-being across employees and more effective corporate governance and decision making.

Barriers to workplace gender diversity entail misunderstandings about differences between the sexes and the relevance of these in the workplace, as well as concerns over merit and unfairness to those belonging to dominant groups ([Dover et al., 2020](#)). In fact, gender differences in behavior vary by “situation and context” and are largely influenced by organizational culture ([Fine et al., 2019](#), p. 40). Similarly, reverse discrimination is not comparable to legally defined discrimination against protected groups. Justice is appropriate where systemic disadvantage has occurred. Other arguments against gender equality practices focus on beliefs regarding inherent differences in occupations and roles and the suitability and level of interest of men and women for these roles ([Baron-Cohen, 2003](#); [Hoffman and Yoeli, 2013](#)), which are largely unfounded.

Enhancing gender diversity

Effective approaches to enhance gender diversity include the following:

- Ensure that hiring processes are free of gender bias, particularly for executive positions ([Schooley, 2022](#)). This might include running job postings through a gender bias screening tool and ensuring that search committees have diverse representation. Fair compensation and promotion processes are critical to both hiring and retaining women. This entails transparency in pay scales and salaries and setting clear standards for evaluation and promotion. Managers must be accountable for tracking and measuring diversity and inclusion goals.
- Diversity training can help address hidden biases within the workplace. Programs to encourage workplace diversity typically have three purposes ([Andrade, 2020](#)). The first is to familiarize managers with the legal requirements for equal opportunity. The second is to focus on the benefits of diversity and the impact of a diverse workforce. The third is to view personal differences as strengths that can enhance group and organizational performance ([Andrade, 2020](#)).
- Another strategy is to ensure access to benefits that enhance work-life balance, such as childcare and flexible work arrangements. The COVID-19 pandemic provided organizations with first-hand experience with flexible work options, demonstrating their

effectiveness in terms of productivity and job satisfaction (SRHM, 2022). Leaders might consider exploring the concept of *family friendly supervisor behaviors* and related training (Hammer and Zimmerman, 2011; Hammer and Kossek, 2013).

- An inclusive organizational culture is another approach for helping women feel a sense of belonging, enhancing job satisfaction and engagement and encouraging innovation and retention. When women work with other women, they have a more positive experience (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

Female diversity in Europe

A European study illustrates some surprising findings related to gender diversity (Lorenzo, 2017). The study was prompted by the researcher's experience that companies tend to pursue gender diversity out of compliance or a belief it is the right thing to do. However, they do not consider it a priority or connect it to goal achievement. The study involved 171 companies in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. In these countries, the pool of females qualified for leadership positions in terms of education and experience has increased over the years, creating a sufficient pool to draw from, yet the number of female leaders still lags behind that of men.

Although the researchers were uncertain that they would identify a connection between diversity and innovation, they thought that an open leadership style where employees were encouraged to speak freely and safely might have an impact. They found, however, that innovation revenue or the development and implementation of actual new products and services (as opposed to merely generating creative ideas) was a direct outcome of gender diversity within a company. Specifically, a critical mass of 20% of women in leadership is needed for gender diversity to impact innovation.

The results present a compelling vision for organizational leaders about embracing diversity, who to hire, and the critical need to develop female leadership. A follow-up study involving 1,700 companies in eight countries produced similar results (Lorenzo and Reeves, 2018). Companies need to set targets for gender diversity and achieve them.

Gender equality in Israel

Another study examined individual and organizational barriers to the implementation of gender equality policy (Ben-Gal and Kidron, 2022). Similar to the Lorenzo (2017) study, which showed that most organizations have gender equality policies in place yet have systemically failed to increase the percentage of women in management and leadership positions, findings from this study show that regulations do little to promote the meaningful implementation of gender equality policy. Although women comprise 63% of public sector employees in Israel, they are underrepresented in higher-level positions despite government reforms, guidelines and reporting requirements as well as policy implementation budgets.

The researchers conducted interviews with employees representative of varying divisions, roles and levels within a public service organization in Israel as part of a national research project. Findings indicated that men saw no evidence of gender bias but rather cited examples of the promotion of women in spite of actual data to the contrary. Women expressed awareness of progress but recognized that bias still existed.

Key barriers to gender inequality included a lack of women-friendly policies aimed at promoting women to high-level managerial positions as well as a predominantly masculine organizational culture, which resulted in the promotion of men to management positions. For example, social networking resulted in promotions going to those within one's network (e.g. other men) rather than in promoting women or encouraging them to apply for higher-level

positions. Furthermore, roles and responsibilities reflected gendered roles (e.g. women in the urban planning division, men in positions requiring physical labor, safety and security).

Key takeaways for practice

Gender equality policies have largely not realized their intent (Ben-Gal and Kidron, 2022; Engeli and Mazur, 2018; Lorenzo and Reeves, 2018; Mazur and Engeli, 2020). The studies reviewed provide key insights for this failure: first, organizational leaders fail to truly recognize the value of gender diversity in real terms, specifically increased innovation revenue (Lorenzo, 2017; Lorenzo and Reeves, 2018), and second, inequalities are embedded in organizational culture to such an extent that leaders fail to acknowledge or address them (Ben-Gal and Kidron, 2022).

The studies reviewed occurred in different contexts and cultures. Both provide insights and increase understanding of gender equality in the workplace. Organizational leaders must address the issues identified in these studies. Certainly, the list of effective approaches cited earlier presents a foundation. Additionally, leaders need to effectively manage change. Leaders should consider the following approaches:

- Conduct a thorough and healthy analysis of organizational culture. What beliefs, values and norms does the culture espouse? Does it reflect an open environment where employees feel safe to express their views (e.g. as described by Lorenzo (2017) or a masculine managerial culture where social networks present barriers to women (e.g. as described by Ben-Gal and Kidron (2022)? The former resulted not only in gender equality but in measurable organizational outcomes, whereas the latter resulted in a lack of progress toward gender equality and the marginalization of women in a context where they comprise the majority of the workforce. What is the impact of the culture? How is the culture impacting goals for gender equality?
- Determine desired outcomes appropriate to the context and the organizational culture. Develop related training and align it with the cultural values and daily practices that are presenting barriers to achieving gender equality rather than adopting an off-the-shelf program. Help people examine their perceptions of ways in which they may not be recognizing the issues preventing the promotion and equality of women. Determine what needs to change and how. Get people from all levels of the organization involved in determining the vision, helping others see the outcomes (e.g. what life will be like) as a result of achieving the vision and leading the charge for change.
- Include experiential, applied learning as part of the training process to avoid one-off sessions that are seldom integrated into the culture or how managers operate on a daily basis. Espousing, legislating or regulating change is not sufficient motivation to enact change. Help people see how women are experiencing the organization (Kotter and Cohen, 2002; Kotter, 2012 for a discussion of steps for effective organizational change). Sustained efforts and follow-up are needed.
- Clearly and consistently communicate the value of diversity to the organization. This is critical to organizational and cultural change in order to attract diverse. Regularly review and discuss results to determine if goals have been met. Report on progress and successes in townhalls, meetings, newsletters and other venues. Find ways to visibly show commitment to diversity and inclusion. Recognize and reward change in divisions across the company.
- Consider setting specific targets to increase the percentage of women in management and leadership roles. “Sex-based targeted recruitment, preferential selection, and quotas can operate as temporary circuit breakers” (Fine et al., 2019) in gender equality efforts. Comparisons with similar companies might be helpful. In Lorenzo’s (2020) study, a critical mass of women leaders was needed to impact innovation. Seek ways to

increase the pool of female applicants for leadership positions and to mentor, coach and train women within the organization for these roles. Adopt female-friendly work policies. Make people accountable for results. This will positively impact job satisfaction and the retention of women.

Conclusion

This article has reviewed the benefits of gender diversity as well as key studies on gender equality to provide insights into policy and practice. Although companies believe in the importance of gender equality, they may fail to see the outcomes in real terms. Additionally, the presence of regulations and required reporting may have little impact on needed changes in organizational culture. Changes in organizational culture take time and need sustained effort. Specific strategies and approaches have been outlined.

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Further reading

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