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Defining an equitable view of the workplace for women

South Africa

The Coronavirus pandemic presents an opportunity to redefine our workplaces to better reflect the diversity of our society.



This year's International Women's Day campaign, #ChooseToChallenge is a call to action of the imbalance of female equality. Choosing to challenge the traditional stereotypes of power is critical to establish new avenues for influence and leadership that reflect the breadth of diversity and talent in society, particularly the value of bringing women's voices to the table.

When activist Emmeline Pankhurst shackled herself to the railings over one hundred years ago, she was fighting a cause to give women equal relevance. As war struck, she made her fight for women relevant to the greater cause of the time - by encouraging their role in industrial production to help her country. Her fight was not about different treatment for women, but about promoting women's equality in public life so they could make an equal contribution.

Time Magazine stated in 1999, when they named her one of the 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century,

“She shaped an idea of women for our time; she shook society into a new pattern from which there could be no going back”.

We are at a similar tipping point.

More than a century on from her remarkable legacy, the speed at which women have progressed in the workplace and society has been painfully slow. Is it because of discrimination, based on an innately biased and prescriptive way of reinforcing the way women are framed? Or perhaps it's the result of women not “leaning in” or seizing the opportunities presented to them as Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, attributed the deficit in our sex's professional success.

Perhaps this is what we are still grappling with. As a society, we allow historical stereotypes to dictate and frame the future of women. Just as Emmeline Pankhurst fought for the cause of female equality, we are still shaping the role of women around an idea that is not of our time.

Society's framing of women as the exception was epitomised by an international newspaper article¹ headline I saw some time back entitled, "don't call me a She-EO". As if anyone would coin the phrase "He-EO" as a byword for the traditional grandees of business. Of course not, because that would be separating men out and defining them as the exception.

Yet repeatedly one reads articles or profiles on successful female leaders of business and politics with references to their family, homelife balance and wardrobe choice. American vice president, Kamala Harris's appearance on the cover of Vogue and her choice of a white trouser suit during the election campaign cultivated copious column inches when the focus should have been on her securing a ground-breaking first female VP role. Of course, fashion can be a powerful and articulate messenger shining a spotlight on a cause, but were there any column inches on President Biden's choice of attire, even a musing on the colour of his tie? No, thought not.

Instead, we need a new mantra that defines the success of women in the workplace that is relevant for today. Otherwise, we risk singling ourselves out and discriminating against the very cause we want to defend and promote.

If there's one thing the Coronavirus pandemic has done is to create an inflection point for how we work and the way our workplace is defined. This unprecedented event can become a turning point to better address equality in the workplace that creates the next generation of leaders which more adequately reflects the diversity of society today.

Mind the gap

Addressing the gender pay gap, mandated in several countries around the world, serves as a pivotal step to fundamentally change culture and drive equality in salary that is no less than today's working women deserve.

The importance of the gender pay gap focus demonstrates a crucial step towards ensuring greater diversity within the workplace that is inclusive of every person making a contribution. It also serves as a powerful mechanism that can be benchmarked on an ongoing basis to maintain its momentum.

¹ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/business/dont-call-she-ee-must-keep-gender-parity-conversation-going/>

Moreover, this is not the only instrument of change. Of course, we need to rip up societal stereotypes and traditional hierarchies.

"Our focus should be about promoting women's equality so they can also make an equal contribution. It's not just about recalibrating and redefining women's roles, but about changing the very culture of the workplace".

Society, governments and corporates must provide equal opportunities to all employees to aid progress towards full diversity. In this respect, all those comprising the corporate workforce should be afforded the same opportunities to prove themselves, rather than based on an obsolete framework driven by a male hierarchy and the inequality of women's opportunities.

There is a responsibility to enhance senior female representation by increasing hiring of women at every level, enabling them to enter the workplace, thrive and move up in the same way as their male counterparts.

But it doesn't stop there. It is also incumbent on governments to create favourable public policies and mandate better labour laws that not only support women to take their equal position in the workplace, but also to give greater flexibility for all employees.

Today, the delineation of care giving and family responsibilities is far less discriminatory, often shared irrespective of gender, salary or role. There are many other factors that influence equality and diversity within business beyond gender and its associated barriers. The gender indiscriminate Coronavirus has deconstructed the traditional working environment and served to level the playing field in unexpected ways. This should be capitalised on to accelerate the equality of females.

The point is there is a far broader goal that we should be striving towards to achieve a step change that facilitates diversity at large. Today's workplace needs to create more attractive and relevant frameworks that help both men and women flourish, rather than discriminating between the two. This would create a material benefit to everyone and ultimately create a more successful and collaborative working environment.

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