

Equal pay, equal access

Considerations for implementing gender equality policies in the workplace

Organizations are increasingly under legal obligations to ensure gender equality policies are implemented in their workplaces. Research shows that despite these obligations, many companies fall short of adequately addressing gender equality. One reason for this is the lack of a single accepted definition of gender equality in the workplace – different interpretations can lead to different policies in different companies, and a gap between the actual workplace policy itself, and its implementation in practice.

Defining gender equality: dimensions, social representations and core concepts

In the workplace, even in developed countries, there remains a pay gap between men and women; there remains segregation between genders in the workplace in certain fields; fewer jobs are available to women; women have less access to career progression and roles of higher responsibility; women remain primary caregivers and as such require more work-life balance.

Gender equality can be an “umbrella” term, covering many different dimensions: gender diversity, equal pay, equal access to roles of responsibility, work-life balance, women in corporate board roles. “Gender in the workplace” can itself be one aspect of gender equality; other areas include family and reproductive rights, rights against sexual violence, political representation, and equal employment. There can be overlap between dimensions – e.g., women’s career progression is impacted by childcare needs and work-life balance. Defining gender equality can be difficult as different organizations, managers and employees place differing levels of importance and emphasis on the varying dimensions. Different dimensions also require different actions – some dimensions involve national legal obligations, whereas others fall under the discretion of company policy. This variation in definition can affect the implementation of gender equality policies and thus gender equality in the workplace.

Social representations are an individual or group’s beliefs, opinions, experience and emotions about an object or concept. They help an individual make sense of and interpret a situation and can explain an individual’s actions. A central core is the dimension most important to the individual. As social representations are individualized in nature, it means that definitions of concepts such as gender equality do not mean the same thing to different people. The central core can vary between individuals, groups, and organizations.

Social representations in the workplace (e.g., equal pay, equal access to roles of responsibility) have different degrees of importance to different workers. This can affect the application of gender equality policies. Different co-existing social representations in a workplace can explain why gender policies fail.

Gender itself can play a role in the importance of different dimensions of gender equality – women place more importance on and have more awareness of gender equality than men; they are more likely to challenge inequalities, whereas men are more likely to follow

traditional gender stereotypes. As certain fields are more feminized than others, it follows that professional fields also place different importance on different dimensions of gender equality.

Gender equality policy in the workplace

Responsibility for implementing gender equality policies in the workplace falls to managers. They need to ensure fairness in recruitment, pay levels and increases, and in career progression and roles of responsibility. However, managers are not typically assessed on gender equality policy – implementation thus relies on their interpretation of the definition of gender equality and which dimensions and representations are most important. This can be at the expense of other dimensions. Gender diversity is commonly seen as the most prevalent dimension of gender equality. If gender equality is not seen as a priority, then this leads to poor application of policy and poor performance of gender equality in the workplace.

Investigating social representations and implementation of gender equality policy in the workplace

Coron (2020) investigated how social representations affect implementation of gender equality policy in a large workforce in France. A hierarchy of dimensions was determined, with equal pay and equal access to roles of responsibility being core concepts, followed by work-life balance and gender diversity.

The hierarchy remained the same but there were differences placed on the importance of these dimensions according to gender, professional field, and management level:

- Women attached more importance to each of the dimensions than men; they were generally more aware of gender equality.
- Workers in a technical field placed more importance on gender diversity (due to difficulties in and low levels of recruitment of women in technical roles compared to commercial roles).
- Workers in a commercial field placed more importance on work-life balance (due to more women working in commercial roles).
- Managers placed more importance on gender diversity than non-managers (they are better sensitized to gender equality due to organizational communication, planning and management responsibility).
- Gender equality was seen as being more of a social concern than a company concern.

It can be seen from these results that group social representations can be stronger than individual dimensions – hence why the hierarchy of dimensions remains the same between different genders, professional field, and management level. It could also be that company policy influences the social representation of the individual or group.

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Conclusion

Representations of gender equality can be seen to influence and be expressed through implementation of gender equality policy. Someone with an invested interest or who knows the policy well will be more likely to implement it. If a manager feels there is no issue with gender equality or feels that the dimension or policy favors women, they may be less likely to implement the policy.

Companies need to determine which are the most important representations/dimensions for their specific needs. This can then highlight any gaps in the gender equality policy and where training or better communication is required. Organizations need to carry out awareness campaigns – especially aiming at sensitizing male employees to issues surrounding gender equality – creating a common organizational culture and shared definition of gender equality and the various specific dimensions most pertinent to the company. Invested interest in and increased awareness of gender equality issues will lead to successful implementation of gender equality policies.

Comment

The review is based on “What does “gender equality” mean? Social representations of gender equality in the workplace among French workers” by Coron, C. published in *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

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Coron, C. (2020), “What does ‘gender equality’ mean? Social representations of gender equality in the workplace among French workers”, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, Vol. 39 No. 8, pp. 825-847.

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