



WOMEN AND THE WORKPLACE: Challenges of Diversity and Women Progression

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Gender imbalances are still a present feature of our society. This is a global phenomenon that is more acute in the developing world. With the exception of countries that are languishing under traditional laws and where religious fundamentalism reigns supreme in both society and politics, various parts of the world have some rhetorical commitment to gender equality. In many instances, countries recognise gender equality in their constitutions, but lack commitment in practice.

We may fancy ourselves to be living in modern times, some may even say post-modern era, but our practices in relation to treatment of women in society and the economy remains medieval. According to a World Bank Report in 2018 focusing on the high cost of gender inequality on earnings, globally women account for only 38 percent of human capital wealth versus 62 percent for men. The struggle for gender equality will not be won in the workplace only. The private is political, and the workplace is an extension of the collective of personal attitudes, social norms, and learned behaviour. Until we change mindsets and norms at the base of society, constitutional commitments, global pledges, and legislation will remain in the doldrums.

Why is gender equality important?

South Africa's democracy is 25 years old, but the country still has a long way to go to redressing discrimination and historical imbalances. Gender inequalities are particularly glaring in the domain of the economy. Achieving equitable representation of women in the workplace, and their effective participation at the top echelons of organizations (civic, private sector, and public sector) is the right thing to do. It is a worthwhile end in itself. This derives from the fundamental human rights of women as created equal to men, with the only differences being biological and superficial. Even such differences do not denote inferiority of women physically, but that they are constituted differently.

Across all other dimensions there are hardly any differences that warrant their differential treatment in social and economic participation. Myths have been propounded in the past about women's cognitive abilities or their supposed lack of predisposition to sciences and engineering. These have been proven wrong time and again. The sooner a new barrier is erected, the sooner it is shattered by a woman who goes against all odds in overcoming socially created obstacles that masquerade as forces of nature. Gender inequality persists in large part due to the fact that there are few men who champion this cause, yet they hold the key since they occupy positions of privilege in the economy.

The former Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg, has used his social capital to become an advocate for gender equality in the workplace. His media company, Bloomberg, has created an index to help companies monitor their performance on gender equality. This index is aimed at shifting both the mindset and nudging companies to demonstrate a high level of transparency in their commitment and practice with respect to gender equality. There is an economic case for gender equality. The assumption that underpins this gender equality index and other initiatives by corporate leaders that promote workplace diversity is based on moral utility - that diverse teams generate better quality decisions, which in turn lead to better outcomes for investors. Some companies have stressed the point that the majority of consumers for their products are women, and that it therefore makes sense to have women in decision making position.

The 2019 Bloomberg Index comprises 230 companies that are located in 36 countries and regions, and in 10 sectors. It is one thing to monitor women advancement in the work place, and quite another to give them the benefits they deserve such as equal pay for equal work, generous or reasonable maternity leave, and recognition of the substantive role they play in society as primary caregivers and repositories of emotional wealth in households – all qualities that are hardly accorded value.

The leading billionaire in the world, Warren Buffett, made an emphatic point about the importance of gender equality during one of the interactive sessions with investors in his company, Berkshire Hathaway. He noted that he had two sisters who were as intelligent as he was, and as equally driven, but were denied the opportunities that made him a wealthy man. He further pointed out that: 'If I had been a female, my life would have been entirely different'. He calls this an "ovarian lottery" since one never knows – or cast a vote – whether they will be born white or black, male or female. Buffett has been sending a message that encourages men in the workplace to use their relative advantage – the figurative proceeds of their ovarian lottery – to promote the advancement of women in the workplace, in particular executive layers (C-Suite) and as board members.

Giving effect to the legislative framework

South Africa is noted for its liberal constitution. The founding provisions of our constitution are based on the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality and the advancement of human rights and dignity; non-racialism and non-sexism; supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law; and universal adult suffrage, among others.

The Bill of Rights in the constitution promises legislative and other measures as a means to promote equality. Moreover, there is also the Employment Equity Act, which was meant to give effect to the constitutional values of equality, especially to redress discrimination and ensure that the workforce in South Africa is diverse. Promotion of equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment and effective affirmative action measures are some of the intended objectives of the Employment Equity Act.

Historically, South Africa's workplace and hierarchies within workplaces were stratified along racial lines. Apartheid practices such as jobs reservation were some of the instruments aimed at creating cleavage in South African society, and to achieve differential economic outcomes. These colour-bar measures were harsher on women, especially black women who also suffered other forms of oppression that were not recognised as harmful. The double whammy of discrimination on the basis of being black and woman at the same time; and cultural forms of discrimination, including through customary laws that denied women the right to participate in economic activities, including owning land, as well as through various forms of traditional practises that subjugated women at home and denied their individuality and worth. This lent itself to what feminist writers and activists in women's movement characterised as triple oppression, simultaneously on the basis of gender, race, and culture.

The legacy of gender oppression and inequality remain deeply etched in the psyche of the South African society, and they are proving impervious to legislative measures. There are certain practices that are difficult to legislate, such as, for example, the differential distribution of labour at home in ways that create competitive disadvantage for women in the workplace. This is an invisible form of oppression that could also happen by mutual agreement at the household level, but with far-reaching implications for the universal struggle against gender oppression and various forms of discrimination in the private and public spaces. Private and informal arrangements that are backward in intimate spaces can undermine the place of women as a group in society. The lack of advancement of women, and diversity broadly in the workplace, cannot be disentangled from household or intimate politics, the role of culture in the community, and intersubjective biases that consider women inferior in society. The workplace comes at the end to cement and reinforce all these fragments of oppression and discrimination that emerge from within society.

Despite the fact that legislative measures are in place to promote equality, progress in this area remains glacial. The reality in the workplace and other domains of the economy goes against the grain of the constitution, precisely because the legislative mechanisms are not strong enough to force compliance, and have limits in the private domain where discriminatory practices that become abundant in public are germinated and acquire their potency.

Strategies for overcoming gender inequality

Women are shouldering the burden of caregiving. There is general confusion in society between price and value, and this is due to the market logic which presupposes that only those activities and products that have a price tag and generate profits should be accorded value. If society does not assign a price (economic utility) to an activity it will not be valued. Much of

society's talent embodied in women is trapped in caregiving and those areas that are regarded as soft – for example, welfare related activities, wellness, caring for the elderly, and cleaning.

Yet many of these activities are critical for the total well-being of societies. There are lessons to be drawn from Nordic countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Iceland, that subsidise child care and provide paid leave for both mothers and fathers; and these countries have flexible working arrangements in their labour practices. There is a grudging attitude amongst employers in South Africa towards their employees. Maternity leave can spell the end of career progression for a woman who is temporarily out of a job to undertake an important activity that is not given economic value. While she is away she could be missing out on opportunities for promotion and forgoes performance bonuses.

This devaluation of additional responsibilities carried by women at home is also possibly due to the fact that men hardly participate in childcare, at best they are lousy part-timers, and have no grasp of its value. Paternity leave is very short for men, presumably to get them to come back early to do 'important' work and leave the soft stuff to women, either their own partners or employed domestic workers who invariably are women. The societal price of such activities can in fact be benchmarked against the meagre wages paid to domestic workers. Flexible working arrangements for women in particular, state-subsidised childcare, and paternity leave are some of the low-hanging fruits that could go some way in recognising the importance of gender parity, as well as to broaden the choices of women.

Second, there is a need for greater awareness to be created, especially from primary school level of the value of gender equality for a thriving society. Teaching tools should be geared towards empowering children at early stage to debunk age-old myths about traditional roles of men and women in society, and to introduce gender-neutral concepts in the curriculum. Algorithms that are built into technology driven learning systems, including educational games, should be configured to empower kids to be more progressive in their outlook on gender relations.

Third, in the public sector, there is a need for more robust measuring tools that are tied to performance management at the top layer of government technocrats. One of the areas of achievement that should attract a high score for performance bonus for an executive leader should be the appointment of female leaders in senior management positions. The retort that they are scarce or are unavailable should be supported by evidence of efforts towards attracting them. Further, there needs to be attractive compensation schemes and conducive work environment for female managers. It is not enough to attract them, but there also needs to be an enabling environment, opportunities for training and development, and opportunities for career progression and to contribute to decision-making.

Fourth, the private sector should realise that it is unsustainable to exclude women from the executive layer. Increasingly consumers reward companies based on their ethical behaviour.

Gender equality is an expression of positive ethics. Emerging research suggests that diversity lead to better corporate performance.

Fifth, government should take seriously the existing legislative framework and press hard on companies to comply. We cannot rely on a goodwill of few business leaders and companies. There needs to be both carrots and sticks, with sticks exercised more often. The public sector will, however, need to lead by example. Although South Africa has made some very important strides in having over 40% of women as Members of Parliament, the various authorities from Mayors in local government to Premiers in provincial government, ministerial positions, and heads of department or directors-general, are still predominantly male. There are no clear leadership succession programmes that are intended at supporting and front-running women. Apart from its internal leadership needs, government needs to use legislative and policy leverage to influence change in society.

Finally, it is when social and cultural norms are tacked that there could be progress in the direction of gender equality. Advancement of women in the workplace will happen slowly if in the private spaces, i.e. households as well as in communities, women are denied their individuality and worth. Decision-makers who are male will continue to advocate for gender equality in rhetorical flourish during the day, while in private spaces they continue to stifle women from excelling by invoking tradition and refusing to bear their fair share of the responsibility of childcare and domestic work at home.