

Leader Perceptions of Gender (In)equality in the Workplace

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Despite gains in gender equality in the workplace, data collection and reporting inconsistencies may mask ongoing issues. Research categorizes employment concerns into four areas: representation, pay, health, and satisfaction. These categories help organizations identify issues and metrics to assess progress. However, meaningful change requires shifts in mindsets and practices. This qualitative study explores insights on gender (in)equities through interviews with 36 leaders. Data, analyzed using the Four for Women framework, reveal a focus on representation and satisfaction for women in the workplace over health and pay and suggest the need for a deeper understanding of gender issues at work.

Keywords: gender equality, gender representation, gender pay, job satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Numbers touting the percentage of women on executive boards and in leadership positions may mask underlying organizational climate issues. Climate, which reflects various aspects of the work environment and culture, can negatively affect job satisfaction. The latter entails task variety, autonomy (Cantarelli et al., 2016; Morgenson & Humphrey, 2006), compensation (Judge et al., 2010), sexual harassment (Feldblum & Nipnic, 2016), workplace stress (Fairbrother & Warn, 2003; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017), and co-worker relations (Andrade et al., 2019; Jansen & Nico, 2004; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). These elements contribute to employees' perceptions of their organizations and to their motivation, performance, and retention.

Similarly, inconsistencies in how gender gap data is calculated and whether it is reported publicly may result in inaccurate portrayals of progress. Wage gap calculations, for example, should consider the impact of occupational segregation, years of experience, and hours worked (Bleiweis, 2020). Women tend to have fewer years of experience and work fewer hours than men due to home and childcare responsibilities. Although the gender pay gap is evident across age groups, it increases over time and is largest for women aged 55-64 (AAUW, n. d.).

Equity gaps are not limited to pay. Women with equal educational attainment to men earn less across all race and ethnicity groups (Jones, 2021). Gaps exist in political representation, industry leadership, and wealth accumulation (World Economic Forum, 2022). Stress levels are higher for women than men. Women are underrepresented in STEM and overrepresented in education and healthcare, and more women access online training to skill, re-skill, and upskill. The Global Gender Gap Index, which benchmarks

gender parity in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment across 156 countries reports that parity will not be reached for another 132 years. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the estimate was 100 years. The pandemic set women back in labor force participation with a rate of 55.8% in early 2021, the equivalent of early 1987 (Jones, 2021).

This research aims to examine the perceptions of men and women leaders on gender issues. While data has a role in increasing awareness and promoting change, change will not occur without transforming mindsets and practices across organizations. As such, this study seeks to understand leaders' experiences and insights about gender (in)equities in the workplace. Specifically, the research questions are as follows:

Research Question #1: *How can organizations improve their practices to address gender-related challenges and barriers in the workplace?*

Research Question # 2: *How do leaders perceive gender (in)equity in the workplace?*

Research Question # 3: *How are organizations supporting women at work?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive review of the literature on women in the workplace and associated equality issues has been synthesized into the *Four for Women* framework (Klein et al., 2018). The framework consists of the following evidence-based criteria:

Representation: A good employer for women employs a large percentage of women at every level and in every unit of the company.

Pay: A good employer for women pays its employees at least enough to avoid poverty, pays equally for equal work, and has no gender pay gap.

Health: A good employer for women supports and protects the health of the women it employs (and the men, too).

Satisfaction: A good employer for women provides satisfying working conditions for women (and men, too)" (p. 9).

The framework's purpose is to guide organizations in measuring and improving workplace equality. It makes the large volume of academic studies on business practices impacting women's lives accessible through a single framework with practical application. It helps organizations identify and address inequality to positively impact women's lives. It also addresses problems with defining and understanding the dimensions of gender equality and determining which dimensions to address (Equal pay," 2021). The Four for Women framework can help organizations determine salient issues for policy and practice. We briefly review each area of the framework.

Representation

Women remain underrepresented in the workforce, and particularly in senior leadership (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Only 26% of leaders in C-suite positions are women, with only 5% of these being women of color. The broken rung, or disparity in the number of women promoted from entry-level to managerial positions, makes it impossible for women to achieve parity at higher levels of an organization. Additionally, women in director level positions are leaving organizations at higher rates than men due to microaggression and advancement barriers. Other factors contributing to the attrition of women leaders is lack of recognition for their efforts in fostering DEI and improving retention and job satisfaction, and a desire for a work culture that values flexibility and well-being. Companies with a track record of success for improving

representation share diversity metrics publicly and set goals for senior level gender representation, including race/ethnicity.

A number of factors need to be examined when promoting equal representation. These include not only workforce participation, but also part-time work, unemployment, underemployment, pay, career advancement, occupational segregation, and caregiving roles (Dey & O'Neil, 2021). In the U.S., women are underrepresented in S&P 500 company leadership, and in fields such as computer programming, software development, and mechanical engineering, but are overrepresented in occupations such as event planning, human resources, and social and community services (Korn Ferry, 2018; U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a). Equalizing caregiving roles may entail more flexibility in men's work responsibilities and schedules (Dey & O'Neil, 2021). Some countries have mandated quota laws. Norway requires 40% representation of female members on public company boards, but private companies have not followed this mandate and some companies changed their designation to avoid it (Tomczak, 2016).

When women are underrepresented in leadership positions or limited to specific roles, organizations fail to benefit from their abilities. Diversity brings new ways of seeing and solving problems and identifying opportunities. Diversity in senior leadership teams directly correlates with increased innovation and financial performance based on a study of over 1,700 companies in Europe and the U.S. (Rocio et al., 2018). These gains primarily resulted from leadership team changes in the diversity dimensions, specifically, country of origin, industry, gender, and career path, illustrating those small changes (e.g., from 1.5% to 2.5% in each area), can make a large and measurable difference in outcomes. These changes do not involve increasing the size of the leadership team but aiming for a mix of diversity to bring insights based on different experiences.

Pay

The gender pay gap has been attributed to factors such as discrimination, women having fewer years of work, and occupational segregation (KPMG, 2019). Women tend to have part-time employment, jobs that pay less and have less risk, and lower-level positions than men (Risse, 2019). They may also lack confidence and salary negotiation skills. Women tend to engage in more hours of unpaid work than men, which limits labor market participation yet is not accounted for in economic analyses (Melbourne Institute, 2018).

Equitable compensation should be examined based on three criteria: no gender gap – the organization's compensation average is the same for women and men; equal pay for equal work – women and men earn the same salary for doing the same work; enough pay to avoid poverty – all employees are paid sufficiently to be above the poverty threshold (Klein et al., 2018). Equal pay for equal work has been a law in the U.S. since 1963 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n. d.); however, no standard or process exists for determining this; multiple factors (e.g., age, pay grade, tenure, location, performance, department, job title) may be included in pay analyses and depending on the calculations, outcomes differ, which means that some organizations can claim they have achieved equity when a different means of analysis would have a different outcome (Burns, 2017; "Moussouris v. Microsoft Corp.," Suddath, 2018). The third criteria (enough pay to avoid poverty) addresses the possibility of a company paying men and women equally but not paying them enough, or not paying a living wage.

Health

Protecting employees' health entails providing health insurance, maternity leave, and protection from workplace risk, injury, stress, and sexual harassment. Organizational climate is critical to improving employee well-being in these areas. Particular attention must be paid to aspects of climate that impact women's performance and job satisfaction. Companies successful at increasing the representation of women provide benefits to improve women's on-the-job experience such as flexible scheduling to support caregiving, back up childcare, and mental health services (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

The U.S. is the only OECD country that does not provide government health insurance or paid maternity leave (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2023; Women's Health Policy, 2021). In the U.S., employers are the major source of health insurance, yet companies often fail to provide

insurance to part-time workers, many of whom are women (Klein et al., 2018). Health insurance improves physical and mental health and provides access to preventative care and treatment (Sommers, 2017), which are critical to women and their families, and to work performance. Employees may be exposed to dangerous physical working conditions and those that cause stress and long-term health issues (Goh et al., 2015). Although women are less likely to die or be physically injured at work (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021b), this does not hold in all work contexts (Taiwo et al., 2008; Walton & Rogers, 2017), and stress resulting from fear of layoff, long or inconvenient work hours, work demands, and hostile work environments is a major source of poor health (Goh et al., 2015).

Sexual harassment occurs in many forms, specifically coercion (unwanted sexual advances in exchange for positive treatment), unwanted sexual attention (unwanted sexual advances not tied to positive treatment), and gender harassment (degrading comments) (Johnson et al., 2018). Although from 25%-60% of women report experiencing various forms of harassment (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016), such reports are often minimized (Bergman, 2002). Tolerance is a strong predictor of the occurrence of sexual harassment (Estrada et al., 2011) as is gender composition—the greater the share of men in a work environment, the more likely the occurrence of sexual harassment against women (Willness et al., 2007), thus representation is a critical factor.

Satisfaction

The representation of women in leadership is related to job satisfaction. Women want managers who help them develop their careers, support their well-being, and promote inclusion, yet managers typically do not meet these expectations (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Companies designated as top performers in terms of representation report providing career development programs and mentorship and manager trainings related to DEI, promotion, and boundary setting for workload (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

The success of diverse management teams depends on “fair employment practices, such as equal pay; participative leadership, with different views being heard and valued; a strategic emphasis on diversity led by the CEO; frequent and open communication; and a culture of openness to new ideas” (Rocio et al., 2018, para. 16). Most companies in the Rocio et al. (2018) study indicated that these characteristics were not present in their organizations; those that reported the presence of these factors had higher revenues from new innovations in products and services.

Factors such as those listed also lead to motivation and job satisfaction. Many organizational behavior theories have identified factors that motivate employees and lead to job satisfaction. Herzberg’s Two-Factor theory accounts for factors that motivate and contribute to job satisfaction, called *motivator* factors, and a different set of factors that cause job dissatisfaction, called *hygiene* factors (Herzberg, 1964, 1969; Herzberg et al., 1959). The former include achievement, recognition, responsibility, work, advancement, and personal growth while the latter entail working conditions, coworker relations, policies and rules, supervisor quality, and salary. This model implies that companies need to improve both motivator and hygiene factors. Many of the factors in the model pertain specifically to women and to variables identified earlier in this review (McKinsey & Company, 2022; Rocio et al., 2018).

In sum, working conditions, job characteristics such as job variety and autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980; Pink, 2009), and coworker relations (Herzberg, 1964, 1969; Herzberg et al., 1959; Ryan & Deci, 2020;) impact employee perceptions of their jobs. Factors such as representation, pay, working conditions, workplace stress, and overall organizational climate impact job satisfaction and motivation, performance, and retention. Employers must create positive workplace conditions to not only address gender inequality, but to encourage employee health, well-being, and job satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Sample

The data in the study consists of recorded and transcribed interviews with organizational leaders in the researchers’ local region. Students in the researchers’ undergraduate leadership theory course assisted in the data collection. After completing a rigorous human subject and qualitative research with interview

technique training, students selected one of three research topics with accompanying interview questions. They conducted interviews with leaders and, as trained, probed to elicit richer insights from participants. The study met all requirements of the Institutional Research Board at the researchers' university, and all participants gave informed consent.

The study sample included 36 leaders, with 12 participants providing insights for each of the three research questions. The sampling process was one of convenience, or individuals available to the researchers and their students. Convenience sampling is appropriate for exploratory research, such as qualitative studies, which seek to understand a particular phenomenon from participants' experiences and points of view (Creswell & Frost, 2017; Frost, n. d.; Stratton, 2021). Although a disadvantage of this approach may be limited sample representation, the participants represented different levels of leadership and experience. A summary of the sample characteristics is provided in TABLE 1.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic Category	Sample 1 Research Question 1	Sample 2 Research Question 2	Sample 3 Research Question 3
Gender			
Male	41.67% (n=5)	41.67% (n=5)	41.67% (n=5)
Female	58.33 (n=7)	58.33 (n=7)	58.33 (n=7)
Managerial/ Leadership Level			
Top level	75.00% (n=9)	75.00% (n=9)	25.00% (n=4)
Middle level	8.33% (n=1)	16.67% (n=2)	50.00% (n=6)
Supervisory/lower level	16.67% (n=2)	8.33% (n=1)	16.67% (n=2)
Avg. position tenure (years)	1.75	2.00	2.00
Avg. organizational tenure (years)	2.00	1.75	2.00

Participants in each sample were asked open-ended questions, with additional probing used to elicit more details when needed. Regarding RQ 1 (i.e., how organizations can improve their practices to address gender-related challenges and barriers in the workplace, participants were asked (1) In what areas do you think your organization can improve? Explain. (2) In your view, what are the greatest challenges for women at work? and (3) what are the greatest barriers and obstacles to achieving gender equality at work? For RQ 2 (i.e., how leaders perceive gender (in)equity at work), participants were asked (1) In what ways do you think women and men are treated fairly or unfairly at work? Can you provide an example(s)? and (2) What needs to be done to enhance fairness in the workplace? What is preventing progress in those areas? RQ 3 (i.e., how are organizations supporting women at work), participants responded to (1) Do your company executives support diversity and inclusion efforts? In what ways? (2) What formal mechanisms does your company have in place to support women's career advancement?

Data Analysis

The analysis of the dataset was informed by prior research on the topic, such as the evidence-based *Four for Women* framework outlined in the literature review (Klein et al., 2018). For this study, the framework served as a means for organizing the data into broad categories, which were then further analyzed and refined. The data was coded to identify initial themes related to the research questions

followed by analysis to identify consistent patterns and relationships across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013).

RESULTS

Research Question 1

Across the three questions posed, the primary challenges and opportunities for improvement were related to (1) representation, (2) satisfaction, and (3) various "other" issues, with unconscious gender biases being the most common theme within the "other" category. Representation was the most often discussed issue among participants. It was referenced twice as frequently as satisfaction's next most salient issue. Discussions about health and pay were less frequent. Sample responses include:

Representation

Participant 3: "So, if our recruiters could reach out to get more diversity as far as talent goes, that would be awesome."

Participant 11: "That kind of gets to our people being included. Are you being included in meetings for something other than helping with those or helping with travel or helping with whatever? ... "So yeah, if we can get more people feeling comfortable contributing, the more ideas will have on how to fix all the crazy stuff that comes our way."

Participant 7: "We're not trying to say here's our percentage, because we're trying to do it in a way that's because of the best person for that specific role."

Satisfaction

Participant 4: "I think right now our upper leadership is really pushing hard to improve all of the employees' work life balance."

Participant 11: "It's expanding what we want to look like moving forward and what's successful, what good looks like has got to include fostering a climate, a workplace of inclusion. And that's again where people feel like they can bring their whole self to work."

Health

Participant 10: "Some of those [biases and discrimination] are covert and so there's not always HR paths forward to address those types of things, but they can still be there and kind of infect the culture of the agency."

Pay

Participant 8: "Our division already is lacking and staying in line with cost of living."

Participant 12: "I think besides the opportunity and compensation levels, I think maybe assisting people in marketing themselves more."

Other

Participant 5: "And then they just reinforce those, those gender biases that it's hard to have a woman on the team or like stuff like that exists. So, I would say that's probably the hardest thing."

Participant 4: “I think societal expectation is it. I think that's the number one barrier at this point.”

Research Question 2

As leaders discussed how they perceived gender (in)equity in the workplace, satisfaction and representation emerged as the most salient issues. Whereas the satisfaction and representation categories emerged 29 times in the interview data, pay and health only emerged six times. Sample responses included:

Representation

Participant 6: “Tradition is big and you could even say that legislation plays a role in and taking away opportunities from people and taking away from the chance to have gender equality in the workplace.”

Participant 8: “And having that diversity in your team can make you have a stronger team.”

Satisfaction

Participant 12: “The portion that stands out most to me is, you know the recognition and support.”

Participant 10: “We oftentimes spend time outside of work hours with the people that we work with and we want to make sure that everybody is valued.”

Health

Participant 8: “Through that and in talking to other women in the workplace, I have noticed that I have never come across a woman who has not been sexually harassed in the workplace. Not one, not one at some job, at some time, at some place, they were somehow sexually harassed or assaulted or inappropriately touched or talked to in the workplace.”

Pay

Participant 6: “I think there is a gender pay disparity in America... I think I keep touching on just making sure we're promoting equal pay for everyone that's a great place to start”

Participant 2: “Although if you do it well as an organization, you can see how your performance can improve by having equality in the workplace on so many different levels.”

Other

Participant 9: “I think it just needs to stay a topic of conversation and be an important point that keeps getting talked about and keeps getting reminded.”

Participant 11: “We've got that unconscious bias class and it's good.... I think it really kind of gets people thinking.”

Research Question 3

Discussions on executive support for diversity and inclusion and formal mechanisms for supporting advancement among women were primarily focused on representation issues. For example, participants reported that their companies have focused efforts to recruit more minorities, construct diverse hiring panels, focus on inclusivity in onboarding processes, and openly acknowledge the importance of women in leadership positions. Discussions about other dimensions of the *Four for Women* framework were less

prevalent. Conversation on pay gaps and other pay topics was absent. Regarding health and satisfaction, participants discussed the value of health benefits and employee resource groups (ERGs), indicating that they have provided a support system and help promote diversity within the organization. They likewise noted the value of company efforts to create a welcoming place where employees feel like they belong. Sample responses for three of the four employment concern categories follow. Participants did not speak to pay issues, thus no quotes for that category are provided.

Representation

Participant 1: “We make a conscious effort to make sure that key roles within the organization are filled by women. We clearly hire based on talent but do believe in a proper amount of diversity given the roles and responsibilities within the organization suite.”

Participant 3: “...we are doing our best to recruit the minorities.”

Participant 4: “...they also try to have diverse hiring panels.”

Satisfaction

Participant 5: “Actually, that's like, a huge part of what we talk about on a daily basis is how can we help people of all backgrounds, of all socioeconomical backgrounds, religions, culture, all that kind of stuff? We really do try to make it a welcome place. And then on top of that, if there are barriers, help take them away.”

Participant 11: “...they've allowed me to do my job as a mom, but still do my job with them. It's been really good.”

Health

Participant 4: “We have multiple ERGs, not just for women. I think there's one for people of color, there's one for the LGBT, I think it's called. We've also implemented diversity trainings during the onboarding process for new hires.”

Participant 12: “I know we do have great maternity leave, which is nice. I am not in a place where I'm having any children, so it's not something that I am personally taking advantage of right now. However, I think that is really cool that when the time comes, I wouldn't need to feel afraid for my job.”

Participant 7: “So along with those onboarding trainings, we also have every sales team manager does take special care so that every representative, both the males and the females are kind of treated equally and they're put through training equally.”

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that leaders in the sample had somewhat limited understanding of workplace gender issues. Regarding their perceptions of (in)equity and their ideas for improving practice, the focus was predominantly on representation with satisfaction the next most prevalent. As such, their strategies related to diversity and inclusion focused predominantly on recruitment and advancement. The leaders' emphasis on these areas is encouraging, particularly the examples they provided of creating a welcoming environment, addressing onboarding needs, and acknowledging the value of women leaders.

They shared ways their organizations are changing the work culture to remove barriers and biases, adopting strategies and training to help women feel valued, and finding ways to support women's career progression.

However, across the findings, the areas of pay and health in the Four for Women framework (Klein et al., 2018) received less mention despite a substantial body of research showing that due to fewer years of work, occupational segregation (KPMG, 2019), underrepresentation in leadership positions and STEM fields (Korn Ferry, 2018; U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021a), part-time roles, lower-level positions (Risse, 2019), unpaid work (Melbourne Institute, 2018), and women leaving organizations at higher levels than men due to microaggressions and other barriers (Dey & O'Neil, 2021), women earn less money than men. The findings indicate that while organizations prioritize diversity initiatives, they may not fully integrate them with broader equity and inclusion efforts and organizational processes (e.g., compensation management). A greater emphasis is needed on recognizing and understanding pay issues. Klein and colleagues (2018) recommend numerous pay metrics that can be leveraged to address pay issues, and organizations should be sharing details about progress on those metrics, such as mean and median pay by gender and level. Thus, discussions of pay can be integrated with other conversations about gender equity, such as women advancing to higher level positions.

In terms of health, all workers need support for caregiving, childcare, mental well-being, (McKinsey & Company, 2022), and preventative health care and treatment (Sommers, 2017). These are critical to job satisfaction and work performance. Still, like pay, leaders discussed health issues less frequently. The limited focus on health, particularly covert biases and harassment experiences, which may be underreported in participants' organizations, suggests that organizations are missing critical opportunities to implement comprehensive gender equity efforts and fully educate leaders on the multi-faceted aspects of gender equity at work.

Ultimately, the data revealed that while organizations are making progress in some areas, organizations need to adopt a comprehensive approach to address all categories of the Four for Women framework (Klein et al., 2018), as they are ultimately interconnected. For instance, enhancing representation is important but must be coupled with equitable pay practices. A comprehensive approach requires collaboration across departments (e.g., HR and finance) to effectively address employment issues known to impact women at work. Tracking and continuously improving diversity, health outcomes, pay equity, and satisfaction levels will be critical for organizations as they establish a mature system for addressing gender equity.

Despite these insights, limitations of the study include a sample from a single region in the U.S. and a relatively small sample size. As with all qualitative research, the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts or other leaders; they represent the perspectives only of those interviewed. However, the sample provides insights into how these leaders perceive gender workplace issues, illustrating that work remains to establish a holistic approach to gender equity and create meaningful and lasting change. Another limitation is that multiple researchers conducted the interviews rather than a single interviewer. However, all researchers underwent the same training process, and we do not believe this affected the reliability of our results.

Future studies can address these limitations and build on this research by exploring gender equity issues in other contexts and seeking a deeper understanding of the underrepresented categories in the current study. For example, future studies could delve into pay, health-related experiences, and organizational disparities. Other opportunities could include cross-cultural or cross-industry comparisons.

CONCLUSION

Despite apparent gains in gender equity at work, the current study underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to creating meaningful change. This research revealed that organizations may still be focused on surface-level diversity issues rather than integrating gender equity efforts and fully addressing the multi-faceted experiences of women at work. It is critical for organizations to establish a robust approach for improving work experiences (e.g., see Klein et al., 2018) and to educate and engage leaders in these initiatives.

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