

Let's leave the stereotypes in the past

It's 44 years since management consultant, Marilyn Loden, coined the phrase, "the glass ceiling" and yet, even today, it continues to be highly relevant with significant work still needed to create gender parity in the workplace.

By Kirsteen Ross
Partner
Ogilvie Ross LLP



We regularly hear statements such as "there are more men called Andy on our company's board than there are women" and it seems incredible that this should be the case after years of striving for equality and a raft of interventions being tried over the decades.

The "glass ceiling" is a distinctly gender phenomenon mainly based around discrimination and sexism. It's a colloquial term which describes an invisible social barrier or hidden obstacles which prevents women reaching the top jobs in organisations or maintains them in lower positions. Interestingly, the disadvantages are stronger at the top of the hierarchy than at lower levels and these disadvantages become worse later in a person's career. In some research articles, women of colour have described encountering a 'concrete ceiling' as race inequalities appear to compound the glass ceiling effect.

It is encouraging that there now seems to be a real sense of urgency combined with optimism to accelerate changes which will maximise female leaders in business. The volume has been turned up on the conversations about the role and treatment of women within the workplace. Senior leaders in business – both men and women – are becoming increasingly vocal about making a commitment to gender parity. Whilst this is a positive, these initial discussions and company initiatives seem to reflect a faulty belief which is that the lack of gender parity or equity is caused by the differences between men and women.

Of course, there are biological, physiological, and anatomical differences between men and women and it's important for both men and women to know how periods, hormones, pregnancy, and menopause can affect women at work. We do need to be able to speak openly about these issues – and not in hushed voices or in dark corners! Whilst these issues do

contribute to the gender gap, and are the basis for many interventions, they do not tell the whole story.

Currently, the rhetoric focuses on the idea that women are inherently different to men in terms of disposition, attitudes, and behaviours. These alleged differences are often used to explain women's failure to achieve parity with men. There is huge variation amongst both men and women, but volumes of research show that both male and female workers are far more similar in their inclinations, attitudes, and skills than popular opinion would lead us to believe. Many of the differences we can see in the workplace today are not rooted in gender traits. Instead, they stem from organisational structures, company practices, and patterns of interaction that position men and women differently, creating systematically different experiences for them.

By focussing on emphasising sex differences, we are normalising them and making them more inevitable. Repeating stories or anecdotes that align with gender stereotypes, simply exaggerate the sex differences and they begin to take on a more determinative quality.

Companies often introduce well-meaning but largely ineffective interventions that focus on "accommodating or "fixing" women them rather than on changing the circumstances that gave rise to the behaviours and outcomes

that forced the need for the interventions in the first place. The hidden obstacles include myths and biases, and they are partly responsible for perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes.

In next month's article, we will examine a few of the myths and biases and the potential impacts they have for female workers as well as exploring ways in which companies can examine their philosophy, culture and behaviours to create a more equitable workplace.

Kirsteen Ross is an executive partner for Ogilvie Ross LLP focussing her consultancy work on advancing the female executive.

Kirsteen Ross
Partner
Ogilvie Ross LLP

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m: 07740 676104
Connect with me on LinkedIn

www.ogilvieross.co.uk

