Women in management: gender, age and working lives

The project reported in this briefing paper explored how age and gender inter-weave and impact on the working and home lives of women managers working in two EU member states, namely Finland and Scotland. The proportion of women in middle management jobs has increased, but few reach leadership or corporate board positions. There are structural problems, such as omissions in work-life balance, and gendered practices of old boy’s networks and men recruiting men (referred to as homosociality), which pose obstacles for the career progress of women. At the same time, women undertake a large portion of home/unpaid work and organising of family life more generally. This limits the time available to achieve equilibrium between paid work, career development and home life. In many organisations, an ethos of long-hours and a culture of presenteeism\(^*\) impact negatively on efforts to ensure well-being and career progress. The challenge is how to address the multifaceted nature of gendered practices against the backdrop of ageing workforces and economic downturn.

The study

The overall aim of the research was to investigate intersections of age and gender in public, private and third sector organisations in Finland and Scotland. The study draws on data from 25 interviews and four focus groups gathered in the two countries during 2008-9. The project involved women managers from different age groups, and considered their careers and choices in workplace, as well as policies in workplaces to support personal and career development.

Women and work in Finland and Scotland

There are many social and political parallels between Finland and Scotland. Geographical and demographic similarities include population size (just over 5 million) with a concentration of around 40% of the population in a core urbanised area of each country. The governments of both countries are addressing the implications of demographic change with ageing workforces and populations in general. The economic downturn from 2008 onwards is also an on-going cause for concern as both governments promote policies to ensure talent is utilised to generate growth. There are also other economic and social changes: families and relationships are shifting with divorce, serial monogamy, co-habitation, family re-formation and an increase in solo living. Changes pose particular issues for women who are expected to work, generally lead on home and domestic tasks, and who themselves wish to develop careers across their adult life. The question of income has implications for retirement given the gender pay gap. This is on average 17.5% in the EU, 20% in Finland and 21.4% in the UK. Taken as a whole the pensions of many women remain lower than those of men (European Commission, 2009).

Finland has greater welfare provision than the UK, but this does not mean that the state system has been able to effectively tackle well-being, work stress and exhaustion. The proliferation of short fixed-term contracts and job insecurity are major concerns. In the Scottish welfare system the government intervention and state support is more limited, and the approach is less regulated and more based upon advice, support and awards.

Women make up half of the workforce in both countries, but 82% in Finland work full-time while this is the case for 59% for Scottish women (Parent-Thirion et al., 2007; Scottish Government, 2007). This notable contrast in part or full-time working is due to the Finnish provision of universal day care and a parental leave system that enables either of the parents to stay home until their child is three years old, and the other parent to work meantime. According to the Fourth European Working Conditions Survey in 2005, nearly 40% of employees

\(^*\)Presenteeism: when employees feel the need to be seen to be at work.

References


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in Finland and 34% in the UK had a woman as an immediate pattern. Of managers, women comprised 36% in Finland and 38% in the EU, and the average in the EU being 33% (Lyytyniemi & Fernández Macías, 2009). However, in both countries, women’s share in upper echelons is lower than in mid-management, and women managers are overrepresented in the social and health care sectors, education, retail and services (ibid.). Gender segregation at work-life issues is a problem in both countries, but even more so in Finland.

Theme-based analysis of the data brought up issues around care responsibilities and their impact on women’s working lives and careers. The interviews and focus groups were anonymised, and all the names in quotes are pseudonyms.

Table 1: One to One Interviews in Finland and Scotland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Finland</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business managers</td>
<td>n=8</td>
<td>n=10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>n=1</td>
<td>n=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>n=1</td>
<td>n=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>n=9</td>
<td>n=12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>n=0</td>
<td>n=0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>n=8</td>
<td>n=12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Care responsibilities and worklife

Caring for others in the workplace is a significant part of managerial work. Care continues to be gendered with women generally taking responsibility for the delivery of care and domestic tasks. Women reported that care for others encompassed many satisfying and enriching aspects of working life, but work-life balance is a problem in both countries. These physical aspects of age and gender were often understood and defined as ageing at an earlier chronological age than men, and the “best age” was described to cover a short time period in early-middle age.

Gendered ageism at work

Gendered ageism refers to discriminatory actions, whether intentional or non-intentional, based on the intersections of gender and age. It is not limited only to relations between men and women, but may be evident among women as well as men. In the data, women managers had encountered gendered ageism at different stages of their careers in both countries. Previous research has concluded that gendered ageism, or ‘sexagesism’, is a more of a problem for women than for men, because sexism is still much embedded in current society and organisations (Carpenter, 1994). Women managers were often understood and defined as ageing at an earlier chronological age than men, and the ‘best age’ was described to cover a short time period in early-middle age.

Gendered ageism takes different forms at early, middle and later stages of careers. Exclusion from career development took place through subtle and covert forms and included, for example, discrimination, often stagnation in one post for some years. More direct gender-based discrimination in recruitment, gender policies and gender mainstreaming efforts, traditional structures in organisations and political decision-making often perpetuate hidden discriminations in particular if they are based on multiple marginalisations, such as the intersections of age and gender. The impact and manifestations of age, ageing and ageism are often experienced differently by women and men working in the same organisation.

Policies and practices on flexible work could enable career development of women in different age groups. The research suggests that women managers who had encountered gendered ageism had either changed their career plans and paths, or were planning to do so.

There is a need for in-depth re-analysis of age and ageism from a gender perspective, and development of pro-gender and age policies and practices in organisations.

New research on gendered ageism, care and careers is necessary given ageing populations and economic downturn.

You are not necessarily taken seriously, because you are a young woman. Sometimes it is just because you are young, sometimes it is because you are not a man, and sometimes it is both.

(Business manager, Fay, Scotland, 47)

Empowering age

Many interviewees realised their potential with maturity—demonstrated through confidence about leadership. ‘People skills’ often develop through multiple experiences of work and knowledge that relates to other aspects of life outside work. The self-reflective approach of many interviewees enabled them to develop skills with subordinates and colleagues, which built on wider perspectives and knowledge of work-life issues.

Women in their mid and later careers had more time to invest into worklife as their children had grown older. Advanced age opened up more freedom and courage in worklife, and possibilities to support others. Ageing brought a realisation of one’s knowledge base and it became easier to challenge problems on policies and practices in organisations. Senior age was a strong empowering element at a personal and organisational level.

I have felt that [mature] age is an advantage in business consulting, as in the very young age a woman can be seen as a ‘girl... as the representatives of the organisations, the managers are often older, age is a benefit. For me the best age has been at over 50 years of age.

(Business owner, Finland, Samantha, 56)

So the older I got, the better I got and the more I was able to convince people of my experience.

(Business owner, Scotland, Cate, 40)

However, care for elders was a day to day reality or on the horizon for many. Growing older brought new opportunities but also on-going challenges with care responsibilities.

Conclusion

To summarise, data illustrates that women managers encountered gendered ageism in both countries. Gendered ageism related to career development, which also included questions of physical appearance and age, and sexualised forms of misbehaviours, even sexual harassment. Care responsibilities at work and home impacted on careers of women in different age stages. Many women changed their career paths because of discriminations and difficulties in career progress. At the same time, age and ageing offered empowering elements for many women managers.