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# Breaking Biases At Workplaces: Understanding Gender-based Discrimination

While sensitization efforts are employed by organizations to showcase their inclusivity and diversity, things are not always smooth in practice, and gender-based discrimination continues to remain at the helm of workplace culture.



10 December, 2020 by Nagma Mulla

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When Sanjana was appointed as CFO of her company, she had not imagined that she would be subjected to constant criticism. Many spoke behind her back, claiming she had used 'womanly influence' to secure the position. They questioned her qualifications, credentials, and decisions. All the men she had reporting into her were affronted that they had to work 'under'

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her, a woman. They deliberately employed an obtuse approach, being offhandish and unresponsive. Their egos had been hurt and they wanted to ensure that Sanjana knew her place. She worked relentlessly to gain their trust and respect, but every effort was met dismissively. At the end of six months, unable to rally her team of men, Sanjana failed to deliver the results she had promised. Dejected and demotivated, she resigned from her position.

This is just one example of how gender-based workplace discrimination can affect a woman’s ability to perform. However, in a market like India, where women are slowly gaining predominance and a foothold in the workplace, it is not uncommon. While sensitization efforts are employed by organizations to showcase their inclusivity and diversity, things are not always smooth in practice, and gender-based discrimination continues to remain at the helm of workplace culture. The foundation of gender-based violence lies in India’s patriarchal approach to socio-economic issues. The entire concept of gender-based workplace discrimination is being highlighted with an increasing frequency in mainstream media such as with Gunjan Saxena’s biopic. The messaging is clear - women are ‘inferior’ or as second class citizens, to be passed over for major promotions, given less or no credit for the work they do and to remain unsupported in the endeavor to give their best to their jobs. Therefore it should come as no surprise, that a report by the World Bank has stated that over the last 30 years, the female labor force participation has reduced by 10 percent (worldwide).

Be it the formal or informal sector, both have preconceived notions about the leadership capabilities of female workers. Many organizations feel that women have a burden of dual responsibility (domestic work and career) and therefore, they refrain from trusting them at higher positions (CEO’s, CFO’s, CSO’s). Despite policies to ensure inclusion, problems tend to arise because of deep rooted biases - that women need to stay at home and take care of the house and children, that their role is merely ornamental in nature and that they aren't ‘supposed’ to work, that a woman who works is living with a man, or is part of a family which is not being able to provide for her, thus proving to be shameful for the latter.

There are several challenges and they do need to be dealt with effectively. At an organizational level, external evaluations of the hiring criteria need to take place to ensure that there are no hidden gender biases and that women who are hired are given an equal chance to excel. This will also help in ensuring that gender-neutral recruitment policies are put into place. Comprehensive workplace sensitization programs need to be designed and implemented with the end objective of helping employees work with each other in a more effective manner, keeping aside any inherent biases which exist. Investments should be made to strengthen leadership among women, mentor them, and give them insight into how their contributions are helping shape the economic fabric of the company, enabling its growth. Lastly, policies ensuring period leave, maternity leave, mental health days and domestic violence related leave should be in place, enabling women to view their workplaces as ‘safe spaces’, spaces which care for their mental wellbeing and professional growth.

At the end of the day, a workplace is where one spends most of their day. It is the place which forms the bulk of our human interaction and enables us to develop our thought process, our professional outlook. Therefore, it is the organization’s responsibility to ensure that the women who work tirelessly to ensure profitability, even in the smallest of ways, feel safe and valued. It will only improve their productivity but make them even more committed to doing their best. While many of these facets of care and nurture are not directly work related, they do have a very important and strong role to play in making businesses successful. Because without women, a holistic more empathetic approach to business would not be possible. Women have just started to shine in their various roles. They will soon begin to eclipse.

Disclaimer: *The views expressed in the article above are those of the authors' and do not necessarily represent or reflect the views of this publishing house*

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