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Women, Leadership, and the Benefits of Gender Inclusion

By Mim Senft, GBA, CWWS, AAI, RYT, President/CEO – Motivity Partnerships, Inc./Gender ARC
Global Wellness Institute, Wellness at Work Initiative

“In order to gain gender equality, women and men must work together, equally, to teach our daughters and sons to embrace our differences, respect each others’ opinions, and remove stereotypes to what a girl or boy should aspire.”

– Basia Christ

With all the coverage of the 2019 Women’s World Cup, there is again more focused attention on pay equity and the issue of barriers of female leaders being seen and valued in the same light as their male counterparts. In the U.S., the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) has still not been ratified, even though the legislation was introduced in the 1970’s. Women in Saudi Arabia didn’t get the right to vote until 2015. Women in Japan have had to protest being required to wear heels at work. And despite improvement in pay equity from the gap in the 1960’s, the pace at which women are moving towards pay equity is slowing down. The vast majority of health treatments and protocols are still based solely on male physiology. Health inequity and pay inequity has a direct impact on the gender gap and a barrier to women leading well.

However, when gender inclusion is valued and there is a commitment to training and increased numbers of women in leadership positions in a specific time frame, then organizations can reap the financial and innovation benefits.

There has been progress in closing the gender equity gap, but according to the World Economic Forum’s data, at the earliest, the gender gap will be closed at over 100 years for countries like the U.S. and more than 200 years for countries like Pakistan.

The World Economic Forum’s 2018 Global Gender Gap Report¹ includes the following:

- Despite years of workplaces with women’s affinity groups, women hold just 34% of managerial positions across the countries where data is

- available, and less than 7% in the four worst-performing countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Pakistan).
- Among the 29 countries for which data are available, working women spend, on average, twice as much time on housework and other unpaid activities than men.
 - Women have as much access to financial services as men in just 60% of the countries and to land ownership in just 42% of the countries assessed.

“Data suggests that for diversity to work, workers have to buy into the value of diversity, not just hear some rules about it. Diversity creates positive benefits when people believe in its intrinsic value. They can’t just see gender inclusion as an obligation.”²

Pay Inequity and Mental Health

There are multiple challenges to gender equity and often there is not enough understanding of how barriers are interrelated. Women’s issues are often addressed in a silo. However, research published by Columbia University in 2016³ showed a clear correlation between pay inequity for women and increased risk for depression and anxiety. That includes women at all levels.

The Caregiving Impact

Caregiving has also been shown to impact mental health, particularly those that are caring for more than one person or both older adults and children.

- In total, the cost impact of caregiving on the individual female caregiver in terms of lost wages and social security benefits equals \$324,044 in the United States⁴.
- Upwards of 75% of all caregivers are female and may spend as much as 50% more time providing care than males.⁵

As organizations look to address rising mental health care costs, they should include a company-wide review of both equal pay for equal work and whether or not qualified women have the same rates of promotion as their male counterparts.

- Caregiving in almost all countries is still viewed as a more female oriented responsibility. With more women in the workforce, companies need to be aware of the impact of caregiving on their workforce and how that impacts financial well-being for women.
- Specific strategies to support caregivers in the workplace has the potential to close some of the gender gap, including flex time, family paid time off, instead of just paid maternity/paternity leave, and support in getting legal documents in place, and emergency backup care.

Organizational leadership needs to understand the financial benefits of work cultures having better gender inclusion and how that can help move organizations in the right direction. However, they first need to understand their own personal and/or cultural biases that may be getting in the way of more meaningful actions steps to close the gender equity gap in their workplace. Closing the gender equity gap requires more than policies and mentoring. It requires leadership that can address challenges, put a strategy in place, and insist on measurable results.

For most organizations, woman's affinity groups still have a focus on mentoring, negotiation skills, and women's empowerment.

- There is very little meaningful conversation with men around the topic of gender equity.
- Too many of the gender equity discussions are happening in single-gendered spaces where assumptions and bias are getting in the way.

Companies need to be having a more gender integrated, strategic dialogue and approach to addressing gender equity and be clear that equity is not the same as being treated "equally."

By having a deeper understanding of gender bias and addressing specific gender barriers, identifying personal and cultural bias in a safe and transparent way, and having a strategy with measurable goals, companies can move towards meaningful change for true gender inclusion and equity. That helps everyone at all levels to:

- Be more engaged in the workplace and contributes to a stronger bottom line.
- Open up more opportunity for innovation and more effective creative problem solving.
- More effectively create a wellbeing work culture that supports everyone—women, men and non-binary—so they can be at their best, be engaged, and can give the company a competitive edge.

With more and more women coming into the global workforce gender equity will continue to be an important issue for all companies to address. Those companies that do it sooner rather than later will gain the benefits.

About the Author:



Mim Senft, GBA, CWWS, AAI, RYT
President/CEO - Motivity Partnerships, Inc./Gender ARC
mim.senft@motivitypartnerships.com
Co-Founder - Global Women 4 Wellbeing (GW4W)
mim.senft@gw4w.org

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