

The Importance of Equal Opportunities at Work: Why should we care about it?

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Abstract

Modern societies recognize gender inequalities as a significant social problem and implement human resource policies intended to reduce such issues. *Gender equality* in labour market is an important issue of development effectiveness since societies that discriminate have a negative effect in their economic growth, weaker governance and a lower overall quality of life. The purpose of this paper is to present the critical parameters for an effective Human Resources Management policy and to highlight the importance of gender equality at work in modern economy and the implications for work and social practices. Data on micro and macro economic indicators, employment rate and gender equality were gathered from published works, national and international databases. The results indicate that gender inequality varies among countries but the problem exists irrespective of the wealth of the society as expressed by the Gross National Income. The challenge for modern societies, countries, European and international institutions is to protect the minorities and prevent gender inequalities at work, particularly when societies experience financial hardship.

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1 The Role of Human Resources Management in the Organization

Human Resources Management recognizes the vital role of the human factor at work and its importance for the success of an organization [1,2,3].

Effective Human Resources Management is a critical element for the success of organizational goals. At an international level, the key role of the effective human resources management has been emphasized as a key element of competitive advantage

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[4,5,6]. Relevant studies internationally, have pointed out the positive relationship between HRM practices and organizational and market performance [7,8].

Thriving companies exhibit innovation, efficiency, flexible structure and require new skills in their organizations and their human resources. The management of an organization's human resources is an integral part of its administration and encompasses important personnel activities and functions, in order to ensure the effective and efficient contribution of the organization's human talent to the creation and achievement of the corporate vision, strategy and objectives [9].

An organization's effective HRM policy includes several functions which can influence the final outcome of personnel effectiveness and organizational performance of companies. Its main activities [10,11] include:

- work and organizational design,
- resource planning,
- staffing; selection and recruitment,
- training and development,
- motivation,
- evaluation,
- compensation, incentive systems and benefits
- labour relations,
- health and safety at work,
- managing change and culture,
- communication,
- equal opportunities at work.

The purpose of this paper is to present the critical parameters for an effective Human Resources Management policy and to highlight the importance of gender equality at work in modern economy and the implications for work and social practices.

2 The Importance of the Provision of Equal Opportunities within an Organization

2.1 What is Equal Opportunities at Work

During the two decades, there has been an increasing focus on the gender equality at work. The promotion of equal opportunities and fair practices has been a key area of concern in modern organizations. An *equal opportunities' employer* is one where women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities participate, progress and succeed in proportion to their availability in the labour market or in the workforce [12].

An increasing number of organisations are calling themselves as "equal opportunities employers". But what does this mean? It can mean anything from a scrap of paper posted on the wall, full of words which no one has ever read, to an active policy where employers have put their equal opportunities policy into action [13]. Straw [14] points out that, if you ask the question "what is equal opportunity" in an interview situation, the reply would usually be: "giving everyone a fair chance".

But how this is possible and what does it require?

There a number of approaches towards the objectives of equal opportunities policies.

One such model outlines equal opportunities at three levels:

(i) Equal Opportunity as *Equal Chance – Equal Treatment* (non-discrimination).

There are certain groups in our society that are discriminated against unfavourably due to prejudices and preconceptions of the people with whom they have to deal. These preconceived ideas influence the actions of the people who hold them, and they way they deal with others. According to this model everyone does have, in theory, an equal chance. It assumes that as long as no one deliberately discriminates unfairly against another person there is *equal opportunity* and everyone should be treated in the same way. If the jobs and services are there, it is up to the individuals to take advantage of them.

(ii) Equal Opportunities as *Equal Access*.

According to this approach, it is the responsibility of the society and the state to take action to remove any existing or potential barriers and facilitate access to the institutional services. By this way is possible to remove unfair treatment of individuals by having scrutinised practices and procedures so as to make them fair to anyone. In this context, important issues regarding the hiring, training and promotion procedures should be addressed. For example, an a private business might *boast* that 50 percent of its staff are women, without making clear that 49 per cent of those women are below middle management grade. Thus, it is possible, even though the first level of discrimination (as described in the "Equal chance" approach) has been removed, that other, unnecessary and unjustifiable barriers will remain [14].

(iii) Equal Opportunity as *Equal Share*.

Similar to the "Equal Access" approach, this model assumes that justice is a *collective responsibility*. The power of the state must be used to correct injustice, so what is important, is *equality of outcome*, not of opportunity [15]. The only criteria against which people discriminate in terms of recruitment, selection and promotion are "lawful, justifiable and necessary" [14, p.65].

There are two distinct approaches to promoting equal opportunities in employment; the *liberal* and *radical change* approaches [16]:

(a) The *Liberal* approach.

According to this approach, people should be recruited and promoted on the basis of their merit in terms of suitability for any specific job. Policy makers are required to ensure that the rules of competition are not discriminatory and that they are fairly enforced on all [17]. In this approach, maximum effectiveness is achieved by resorting to "positive action" measures and practices which will allow individuals to enter competition free of "artificial" and functionally irrelevant disabilities [18].

(b) The *Radical* approach:

While the liberal conception is primarily concerned with the "fairness" of procedures, the radical approach is concerned with the "outcome" and the fairness of distribution of rewards among employees [16,17]. It purports that equal opportunities policies aim at redressing current imbalances between members of different social groups in terms of their possession of specific jobs. For example, more women or disabled people in senior positions.

The radical approach calls for "positive discrimination" [19] in terms of the deliberate manipulation of employment practices so as to obtain a fair distribution of the deprived or disadvantaged population within the workforce. This may, for example the imposition of quotas for people with disabilities. It has been pointed out that this approach is primarily concerned with the outcome, giving disadvantaged groups a boost up the hierarchical ladder, but failing to change existing attitudes and cultures [17].

2.2 State Provisions for the Protection of Discrimination at Work

Internationally, the laws which govern equal opportunities at work try to ensure that people are treated *equally* on the basis of individual need [13].

In Europe, since the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, EU laws and *Directives* have been enacted in the area of anti-discrimination at work. Main scopus of these *Directives* have been the establishment of a general framework for the equal treatment in employment and occupation irrespective of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion, belief, sexuality, disability, age (Directives 2006/54/EC; 2000/43/EC; 2000/78/EC).

In Greece, in accordance to the EU Directives, there have been enacted anti-discriminatory laws for the protection of equal treatment and accessibility at work. There are specific laws, for example, for the obligatory placement of individuals from protected social groups to private companies and public organizations via objective criteria of placement based on age, family and economic conditions, formal qualifications and percentage of disability.

3 Gender Equality in the Labour Market in the EU and Greece

3.1 Gender Equality across Europe

Gender equality is an important issue of development effectiveness since societies that discriminate have a negative effect in their economic growth, weaker governance, loss of talent, and a lower overall quality of life [20].

Research from various countries suggests that companies with a higher representation of women at the most senior levels deliver stronger organisational and financial performance as well as better corporate governance [21,22,23].

Internationally, despite the large percentage of female participation at work and their high level of education, there are still inequalities at work between man and women such as: gender wage gaps and female under-representation in higher levels decision-making positions both in the public and private sector [24].

Women face significant wage differentials compared to their male colleagues while their participation in senior positions and entrepreneurship remains low [25].

The right to an *equal pay* is part of the right to *equal treatment*. *Gender pay gap* is an international phenomenon. Gaps are particularly evident in the Middle East and North Africa, but also persist in high-income OECD countries [26].

The average difference between male and female earnings is more than 15% and exceeds 20% in several countries. The *gender pay gap* varies across Europe from below 10% to 30% (as in the case of Estonia) and can be seen in all countries irrespective of their Gross National Income (*GNI*), revealing that gender pay gap and gender equality is a problem viewed both in wealthier and poorer countries (Table 1).

Table 1: Gender Pay Gap and Gross National Income in the European Union in 2012

Country	Gross National Income (GNI) in USD	% of Gender Pay Gap
Ireland	38970	14,4
United Kingdom	38250	19,1
Denmark	59770	14,9
Netherlands	48250	19,6
Germany	44010	22,4
Belgium	44990	10
Luxembourg	76960	8,6
France	41750	14,8
Portugal	20580	15,7
Spain	30110	17,8
Sweden	56210	15,9
Finland	46940	19,4
Estonia	15830	30
Latvia	14180	13,8
Lithuania	13850	12,6
Poland	12670	6,4
Czech Republic	18130	22
Slovakia	17171	21,5
Austria	48160	23,4
Hungary	12390	20,1
Slovenia	22710	2,5
Croatia	13290	18
Romania	8420	9,7
Bulgaria	6870	14,7
Italy	33840	6,7
Greece	23260	15
Malta	19760	6,1
Cyprus	26000	16,2
EU average	27063	16,4

Source: Eurostat 2012, and IMF World Economic Outlook Database 2012

Gender equality at work is a multidimensional issue; its key dimensions include labor force participation, employment, earnings, and job quality in terms of benefits, rights, opportunities for skills development [26].

Internationally, gender disparities can be viewed not only regarding pay differences but in

broader areas such as *economic participation and opportunity*, *educational attainment*, *political empowerment* and *health and survival* - life expectancy and sex ratio [27].

Similar is the situation in the labour market where women unemployment is higher than men topped with gender gaps in earnings.

The *glass ceiling* effect is considered a possible contributor to the *gender wage gap* in terms of existing invisible or artificial barriers which prevent women from career advancing and limited chances for income raises [28].

A glass ceiling inequality has been characterized as a distinctively *gender phenomenon* and represents a gender/racial difference which could not be explained by any job relevant characteristics of the employee [29].

Internationally, women continue to be under-represented in higher levels decision-making positions, despite the fact that they make up nearly half the workforce and more than half of new university graduates in the European Union.

In 2013, women accounted for 16.6% of board members of large publicly listed companies in the 27 EU Member States, while one in four large companies has no female representatives at board level [30]. In 2013, the gender imbalance in boardrooms across the EU (Fig.1), was large with the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany and Slovenia to be the only Member States having at least 20% women on boards, while at the other end there are countries like Romania, Cyprus, Estonia, Portugal, Malta and Greece where women hold less than one in ten positions [30].

Of the 33 European countries covered by the Commission database, only two (Iceland and Norway) have managed to achieve gender balanced boards. In Greece, 17% of the large listed companies have more than one women on their board, 40% have only one woman, while 33% have no women board members at all (Figure 1).

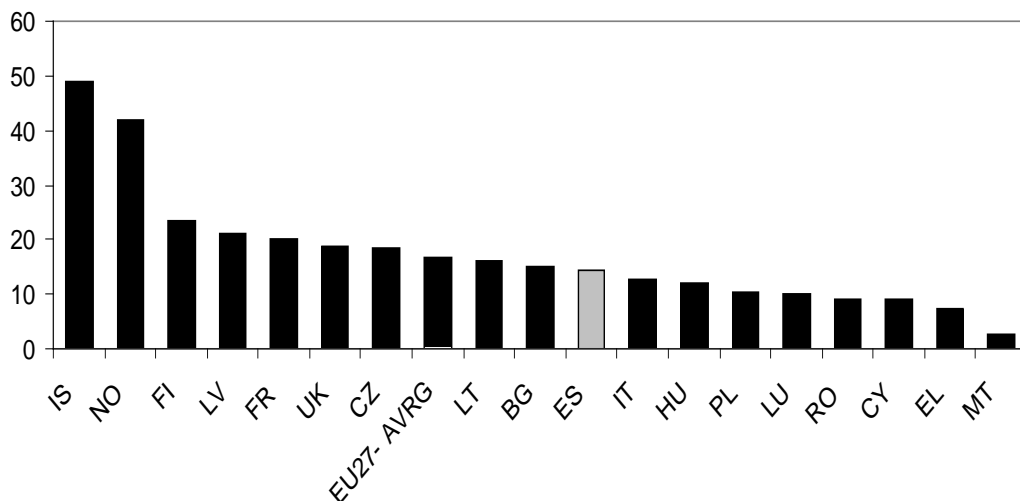


Figure 1: Male and female representation on the boardrooms of large companies across the EU-27

Source: European Commission (2013).

Women are still noticeably under-represented especially in senior decision-making positions, as in the case of the political realm where women are outnumbered by men in all parliaments worldwide (Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage of female political parties' leaders (2012)

Country	% of women leaders in parliament parties *
Norway	40-50%
Norway, Germany, Denmark, Croatia	30-40%
Latvia, Slovenia, Finland, the Netherlands	10-20%
Greece , Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Spain, France, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, United Kingdom, FYROM, Republic of Serbia, Iceland, Liechtenstein.	0%

* with at least 5% of seats in the national parliament

Source: European Commission Database (2012) *Women and Men in decision-making*

3.2 Gender Equality in Greece

In Greece, since the financial debt crisis in 2009, gender equality issues have been marginalised in public discourse and public policy initiatives [31].

Greece is below the OECD average with regard to the gender wage gap, it also ranks among the EU countries with the widest gender pay gaps [32,33].

In 2012, the gender index ranking in 135 countries globally showed Greece, on the 99th place on gender based gap regarding *political empowerment*, on the 80th place on *economic participation and opportunity*, on the 69th regarding health and survival and the 55th place on *educational attainment* [27].

Although women's labour participation rose faster than that of men, women continue to gather in the lower paid and low skill jobs [31] and are still underrepresented in high ranking, executive and managerial positions (Table 3, Table 4).

Table 3: Greece – Gender based Gap (2013)

	Female	Male	Female to Male Ratio 0.00 = Inequality 1.00 = Equality
Labour force participation	58	79	0,53
Wage equality for similar work (survey)	-	-	0,66
Estimated earned income (PPP US\$)	17,071	32,467	0.53
Legislators, senior officials & managers	28	72	0.40
Enrolment in tertiary education	94	85	1.10
Women in parliament	21	79	0.27
Women in ministerial positions	6	94	0.06
Years with female head of state	0	50	0.00

Source: GGGR Country Profiles (2013)

Table 4: Female Teacher Participation in Education in Greece (2013)

Female Teaching Staff	% of Total Teaching Staff
Primary Education	65
Secondary Education	58
Tertiary Education	35

Source: GGGR Country Profiles (2013)

The case is similar in the public sector where masculine culture is dominant in most organisations, and consequently it is not surprising that women's participation in public management, particularly at the higher levels of the hierarchy, is still very low [28,34].

In addition, there are no women leaders of major political parties in Greece (Table 2), compared to 30-50% of women leaders in Norway, Germany, Denmark and Croatia and 10-30% in Sweden, Luxemburg, Belgium, Austria, Romania.

In the case of public education, similar to many other countries [35], women are not equally represented in school/University management positions in Greece. Despite their numerical dominance in the teaching profession, women continue to hold a minority of leadership positions in all levels of education [36].

Currently, there are, for example, only two female University Rectors in Greece – out of twenty one Universities in total. This is not explained by lower level of academic qualifications such as postgraduate studies or by lower performance of women in publishing in scientific journals [37,38,39].

In general, gender wage gaps and discrimination against female employees continuous to

be widespread especially in the private sector, including arbitrary dismissals or *forced* acceptance of changes in employment status before / after return from maternity and parental leave [31].

4 Making Equal Opportunities happen: Key Factors

Many reasons have been advanced to explain women's relative failure to reach senior managerial positions internationally, despite the dramatic increase in the number of women pursuing managerial and professional careers [40,41].

These include: bias and discrimination, fear of failure, the prevalence of a masculine organizational culture, male dominance in the administration, lack of awareness of the promotion system, lack of female role models, mentoring, peer support and networking, the complexities of the dual role of women as professionals and housekeepers, as well as society's various stereotypes and prejudices, such as the idea that women lack the competencies considered vital for effective management [42,43,44].

The challenge for modern societies, countries, European and international institutions is to protect the minorities and prevent gender inequalities at work, particularly when societies experience financial hardship.

Equal Opportunities will not "happen", but instead the State, organizations and professional bodies showing a commitment to Equal Opportunities policies need to take action in order to make them work effectively [15].

Key actors towards the effective implementation of Equal Opportunities include:

- *Writing and Publishing the Equal Opportunities Policy:*

An Equal Opportunities Policy should be written and made known to managers, supervisors, employees, job applicants and notified to recruitment agencies, job centres and any other sources from which job vacancies are filled. Having adopted a written Policy, enables organisations to focus attention on their commitment and allow such a commitment to be expressed publicly. It will also be helpful, if an organisation consults, adopts and publicises a positive policy on issues such as: career planning, relocation, maternity - paternity leave / leave for family reasons, career break, re-entry schemes, flexitime, job-sharing, part-time working. It is also vital to ensure that everyone in the organisation knows how the systems work in issues such as recruitment, appraisal, promotion, career development [15].

- *Involving everyone:*

Despite that fact that the issue of Equal opportunities touches all areas of human resources management, policies and collective bargaining, it is often treated as an *isolated and marginalised issue*. Equal Opportunities is an issue that affects everyone, not just women and ethnic minorities. The commitment of all employees is vital for the successful implementation of an Equal Opportunities policy. It is a process that does not happen by chance but is initiated through a series of workshops involving everyone in the organisation [45]. If Equal Opportunities policies remain simply top-down initiatives or the concern of only one department or group, they will almost certainly achieve very limited success [46]. Employees, instead, should be encouraged to contribute their ideas about the changes they believe would bring full equality of opportunity.

- *Commitment from senior management:*

Policies need also to be supported by senior management. Particularly important is also the full commitment of Trade Unions -where they exist- for the elimination of discrimination and the successful operation of the policy [45].

- Training and Education:

Gender equality training programmes for private employers, business owners, heads of personnel departments of large companies and other professionals are vital in challenging gender stereotyping in the recruitment of new employees and in the progress of existing employees [31]. Training helps to raise awareness and better understanding about the issue of Equal Opportunities, share views and ideas, develop new skills and a sense of ownership about the issue [15].

In the case of Greece, for example, there is no gender equality training for employers and personnel departments of large companies, nor are there any incentives for companies to introduce gender equality practices [31].

- Programmes to support the advancement of women:

Such schemes can include mentoring and sponsoring networking programmes for unemployed and employed women in specific sectors of the economy in order to promote synergies and empowerment [30,31].

- Examination and monitoring current employment practices, policies and procedures:

Such an action is imperative in order to identify discriminatory or unfair practices and procedures. As well as focussing attention on equal opportunity at the recruitment stage, there is a need to look also at what happens to people already there; the induction, training and promotion process [14,15].

Job postings advertisements must reach both sexes and a whole range of age groups, while importance should be paid not to give the impression that one sex rather than the other is *preferred* by the potential employer.

- Identify and take remedial action:

Monitoring should identify barriers to equality of opportunity and the possible reasons for their existence.

- The role of the State:

Although the law can establish principles and set standards, it is mostly ineffective as a "change agent" [45] Removing unlawful discrimination does not guarantee that full participation and equality has been achieved; it will also be necessary to make up for the effects of unequal treatment in the past [12].

In the case of women representation in national parliaments, for example, we can see that the imposition of legislative quotas as in the case of Greece - since 2008- although has had a positive impact, women politicians currently count for only 21% of the total number of the country' MPs [24]. In contrast, countries like Finland, Denmark and Iceland where although there are no legislative quotas and still women politicians hold more than 40% of the total number of their national parliamentary seats. A key point to this has been the countries' effort in raising awareness, widespread media coverage on gender issues and maintaining a social-political debate in improving gender balance in decision making [47]. State provisions can be made for incentives for private companies to adopt gender equality objectives, such as creation of databases on companies that respect gender equality and promote marketing and organisational strategies that encourage gender equality in the labour market [31].

- The role of the Human Resources Department:

The Human Resources function has an important role to play for the successful implementation and communication of an Equal Opportunities programme. Human Resources departments are responsible for ensuring that their policies and systems support the overall business strategy [45]. A common "error" within human resources departments is that personnel staff are seen (or appointed themselves) as "sole guardians" of Equal Opportunities policies [14]. *Ownership* of an Equal Opportunities Policy by everyone in

the organisation is vital. Human Resources staff, nevertheless, can have a significant bearing on the success of an Equal Opportunities programme.

Human resources departments can assist successful implementation of Equal Opportunities Policies in various ways such as:

(i) Stimulate departmental initiatives.

By this way, Equal Opportunities can more closely allied to departmental needs and the initiatives actively sponsored by the people in Human Resources who will often have to "make them happen" [45].

(ii) Provide statistical data.

Human Resources can provide vital information such as: the number of applications received for a vacancy, what proportion came from women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities, how many of women, minorities and disabled people are in management positions, and so on.

5 Conclusion and Final Remarks

Unfortunately, till today, gender inequality at work can be seen all over the world both in developed and developing countries.

Cultural and socio-economic parameters can have a significant impact on gender (in)equality of the working population. The current global financial crisis may further increase gender inequality, deteriorating the position of women at work [20, 48].

The issue of Equal Opportunities and equality in general, includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. Apart of its moral dimension, it is an vital element of a country's economic empowerment and a key factor for the well-being across the world [32].

The costs of *unequal opportunities* are multifold: high turnover rates and under investment in labour saving technologies within an organization and skill shortages and constraints on growth in capacity and income at a national level [49]. The under-utilisation of the skills of highly qualified women means a loss of economic growth potential [24].

Internationally, there is evidence that there can be significant macroeconomic gains in cases where given the opportunity, women were able to develop their full labour market potential [50]. It has been pointed out that, raising female labour force participation rate to country-specific male levels would raise GDP in the United States by 5 %, in Japan by 9% and in the United Arab Emirates by 12 % [51].

Despite significant progress in recent decades, still women account for most unpaid work, and when women are employed in paid work, they are overrepresented in the informal sector and paid less than their male colleagues. On top of that, in many countries, and female representation in senior positions and entrepreneurship remains low [25].

Economy and societies in general can benefit by offering indiscriminate access to education and employment to men and women. The key for the future of any country and any institution is the capability to develop, retain and attract the best talent [27]. Internationally, successful companies have been those that consider their human capital as their most important asset. In this is the strategic role of human resources management, especially during the current global financial crisis, to safeguard equality, attract and retain the talented employees irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, disability or social background.

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