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Achieving gender equality by implementing work–life balance measures in Swiss SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Key points identified in this study to break through the glass ceiling and reach not only gender parity, but also a work–life balance from which all employees can equally benefit, are: improve girls' position early on at school, give women sponsors and mentors to help them develop the competencies to be confident, offer parental leave to encourage women to come back after giving birth, implement new work forms, give employees the possibility for care work, and put legal and political regulations as well as policies in place to influence companies' decisions when implementing new measures. To introduce new measures into a company's organizational structure, a detailed research process on which measures are requested and can be implemented, as well as an external consultant or tool, need to be used. This process is very individual per company. The goal is to improve employee satisfaction, have less fluctuations, and put extra financial costs into perspective.

Synopsis

Gender inequality persists in today's world. To reach equalities in different fields, the United Nations (UN) has introduced Sustainable Development Goal 5, which wants "to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (UN Women, 2017). This goal is a good orientation point for companies to help them define their measures to lower the gender gap within their workforce.

Several key points have been identified in this study to break through the glass ceiling and reach not only gender parity, but also a work–life balance from which all employees can equally benefit. First, it is important to improve girls' position early on at school, to help them be more confident in following a career in a traditionally male field. With giving them role models and the mindset that all careers are possible, the general perception of gendered fields can be broken up. Second, women need sponsors and mentors that help them be confident and get the chance to follow a career that can lead to top management.

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Third, the offer of parental leave could encourage women to come back after giving birth and fathers might be more willing to work part time. Fourth, implementing new work forms like working remotely may lead to higher employee satisfaction. Fifth, giving employees the possibility to take care of family members in need or children next to work can lead to better work–life balance. Last, legal and political regulations as well as policies are key in companies' decisions when implementing new measures.

To introduce new measures into a company's organizational structure, a detailed research process on which measures are requested and can be implemented, as well as an external consultant or tool, need to be used. This process is very individual from company to company. A list of questions is proposed in the last part of this article. The goal of implementing a process is to improve employee satisfaction, have less fluctuations, and put extra financial costs into perspective.

Gender equality and work–life balance are topics that correlate. For this reason, the proposed work–life balance measures will indirectly lead to reaching gender equality.

Methodology

The article is structured as a descriptive study that focuses on the phenomenon of the gender gap women face when entering certain fields of work. Following a qualitative research study approach, this article is based on inductive reasoning and follows a logical thinking process where generalizations based on specific details are made. The literature review provided an insight into previously conducted research and measures already set in place. These findings served as a basis for the interview questions of the semistructured interviews among a nonrandom empirical sample of nine experts based in Switzerland. The nature of the investigation was nonexperimental. The interview results were then compared with the results from the literature review to define measures that companies and governments can implement.

Findings

Theory states that the way we traditionally look at women's position shapes how we evaluate people's actions. Even though women are nowadays more integrated in the work environment, they are still doing proportionally more work in the household than men. Women are judged no matter their role, and changing traditional perceptions is difficult. (Ridgeway, 2011)

Women in the work environment

Taking a look at the role of women in the workplace is important when wanting to overcome perceptions and disadvantages such as the pay gap (Catalyst—Workplaces that work for women, 2020; Becker et al., 2019).

By giving everyone access to education, inequalities in society in general can be countered, as pupils from all social backgrounds are formed to think more openly. Schools, higher education institutions, and more play an essential role in creating cultural and social values on which our societies are built (Baker et al., 2004, pp. 152–154). Different studies have shown that men and women learn differently. While the discrepancies in mathematics by girls to boys are slowly decreasing, boys' gaps in literacy and writing persist. Those differences in learning need to be considered when teaching, to change the behavioral design (Bohnet, 2017, pp. 203–204). One factor that influences women's persisting underperformance in mathematics is that women tend to underestimate their capabilities, where men are overestimating them. Often this leads to women stopping their studies in nature science or engineering. The fact of how women and men estimate their performances should also be considered by companies when letting employees evaluate their own performance. Without somebody from management evaluating the performance by knowing the employee's personal evaluation, the evaluation process can be kept as fair as possible (Bohnet, 2017, pp. 207–209).

When it comes to women starting their own company it shows that they are more risk-averse, and this influences them to lean even more toward what they are good at—good customer relationships. Even though female entrepreneurs fulfill their customers' immediate wishes, they often play it safe and through this miss out on market opportunities (Neneh, 2019, pp. 224–225). Additionally, their performance stays the same if they are not willing to take risks, even if they are customer oriented (Neneh, 2019, p. 233). This is also reflected in female entrepreneurs' likelihood to not be benefiting from their higher capability of setting goals they want to achieve. It seems like the more aggressive/risk taking a field, the harder it is for women to succeed (Bendell et al., 2019, p. 123).

The gender gap in higher management is based on women's absence from work for longer time periods (care work) and being less likely to return to work full time after maternity leave (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development [OECD], 2017, pp. 143–147). Other factors include the lack of ambition to want a career and reach the top or the difficulty to find mentors and sponsors to support them in their career ambitions (Chin et al., 2018, pp. 10–13). Implementing regulations that, for example, require companies to openly publish their board

compositions have led to companies trying to actively fulfill them and more women being part of company boards (Bohnet, 2017, pp. 297–300). Implementing such regulations has shown first effects, as the number of women on boards has globally increased from 15.1 percent in 2015 to 24 percent in 2021. In Europe (34.4 percent) and North America (28.6 percent) quotas and other regulations lead to a higher number of female board members than the global average (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021, p. 9). Switzerland has increased the number of female board members by 11 percent since 2015 to 25.9 percent in 2021 (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021, p. 11). Additionally, companies with more diverse boards and management seem to outperform companies with less diverse boards (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2021, pp. 21–27). With 34 percent women at the level of managers and people in higher management in Europe it shows that the representation of women at higher levels in companies are closely linked. With 33 percent female managers, Switzerland is a little bit behind the European average. Not one of the countries listed has reached 50 percent as of 2021 (Eurostat, 2021a). The gender employment gap, which states that the more children a family has the bigger the difference in employment rate between men and women, is also a factor that plays into the lack of women in higher management (Eurostat, 2021b).

Implementing the following measures has helped companies in the United States to attain more women and be less biased during the hiring and promotion process:

- defining a goal on how many women should be in higher management,
- putting women on track to be promoted in the future by including them before they reach the top,
- having people that evaluate them trained to do so without bias—important during recruitment and promotion, and
- developing unbiased criteria for employee evaluation (McKinsey & Company, 2020, p. 10).

Even with all of this, it is still important to consider that gender inequality is only one side of the coin and many other inequalities may arise due to the economic situation, geographical origin, or social upbringing of people (OECD, 2016).

Programs such as "HeForShe" by the UN are implemented to have men involved in the topic of diversity. Other programs put women as the focus of their programs (Bohnet, 2017, p. 239). In addition, the programs focused on bringing more women into the finance world state the lack of work that has been done before to bring women into this industry. The effectiveness of those programs can only be evaluated in a few years (Bohnet, 2017, p. 239).

Work–life balance

Implementing flexible working options and creating a better work–life balance is beneficial for all employees (McKinsey & Company, 2020, p. 19). "Work–life balance is the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (Kalliath & Brough, 2008, p. 326).

Part-time work is one of the most common forms to achieve a work–life balance. In 2020, 61.5 percent of women in Switzerland worked part time compared to 17.6 percent of men (Eurostat, 2021a, sec. Employment patterns). The reasons for working part time in Europe vary:

- responsibility to take care of children or support family members (29 percent women, 6 percent men),
- not able to find full-time employment (23 percent women, 36 percent men),
- following further education programs (6 percent women, 16 percent men), or
- being ill or having a disability (4 percent women, 7 percent men) (Eurostat, 2018).

Also, between the different OECD countries work–life balance possibilities vary. Often this is due to political decisions and laws set in place. In addition, societies' perception and mindset influence how and when measures are implemented. An example is the application of new work forms. The most common ones in Europe are job sharing, telework, and crowd working. However, northern countries focus more on employees where southern countries look more at self-employment (Eurofound et al., 2018, pp. 14–15).

Data analysis

The experts all said that implementing measures has an important influence on reaching gender equality. Having social partnerships and talking with each other are key. This includes "leading by example" by top managers. The following steps are important according to the experts: First, the government must implement legal policies and regulations (like parental leave). Second, develop the mindset and change the perception toward the topic of gender equality by introducing better work–life balance measures to get changes to work and be accepted by society. Third, create role models at an early age to show children what is possible. Fourth, have smaller companies follow the lead of bigger ones. Fifth, have financial subsidies as key measures to reach gender parity within the next couple of years (for example, day care). Further, changing the way job descriptions are written, emphasizing new work forms, and being certified for equal pay will be beneficial for companies.

Implications and recommendations

To reach gender parity by 2030 and to change people's perception of the work–life balance it is important to eliminate existing discrepancies and implement work–life balance measures. The literature analysis and the responses of the interviewees led to the following implications and recommendations:

- *Giving everyone access to education* helps to lower inequalities over all levels of society.
- *Changing the mindset* regarding traditional gender roles and creating role models instead. This way, male-dominated fields will get interesting for women and female-dominated fields will start to attract more men. This can also help to increase the salaries in traditionally female fields like nursing.
- *Having company networks supporting women* can help to increase women's interest in male-dominated fields, like asset management, and find mentors.
- *Having more women in higher management* provides role models and diversifies the company. Studies show that companies with a diverse board of directors can be more successful financially.
- *Introducing better measures to combine private and work life.* The government should implement new national laws, regulations, and policies that take companies into responsibility—like the Gender Equality Act. Companies can work with organizations and use tools that help with implementing work–life balance measures. Examples are the initiative by LEAN IN (2020), "50 Ways to Fight Bias," which offers a set of cards that helps to raise the topic of gender bias within a company and the association UND, which helps small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Switzerland to develop a framework according to the "Modell UND" (Fachstelle UND, 2020).
- *Integrating new work forms*, such as remote work. However, costs should be clearly regulated within the company.
- *Offering options to work part-time for everyone.* Laws and policies would need to be adapted, so that part-time workers do not lack money in their insurance or retirement funds.
- *Lowering the mind gap regarding care work and giving time off* for taking care of children and relatives.
- *Changing from maternity leave to parental leave* would help reach better work–life balance. Interviewees also mentioned that parental leave would be beneficial for women to continue working and pursue a career.
- *Getting help from the outside.* To improve the integration of women in the workforce SMEs need to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as an employer by working with advisory companies or using equality tools (for example, E-Learning Boxes).

- *Introducing programs* such as "HeForShe" by the UN, where men are involved in the topic of diversity (Bohnet, 2017, p. 239), or ones that put women in the focus, like "Girls Take Finance," is very important.

Implementing the proposed measures can be a first step in opening people's mindset and changing people's perception of employment and private life. Using offers (associations and tools) available is crucial to find the right measures for the SME's workforce and implementing them. It is important to get employees involved in the process so they are more connected with the ideas and will more likely accept the measures once they are introduced. Having measures accepted over all levels of the organization, especially the management board, is crucial. Only when the top is showing what is possible will everyone accept new measures and changes.

Strategy development

There are several points that need to be followed when developing a new strategy inside a company. The following is a short list of questions to ask and answer by the company in the strategy process. These questions are based on the author's own experiences at work and responses from interviewees.

(1) What are the problems your employees face today?
   a. Do an anonymous survey to find this out.
(2) Has your company already implemented certain measures?
   a. If so which and why?
(3) How can your employees deliver the best service for your customers?
(4) What would the effect of the measures be on customer service?
(5) What should the measures do for your employees and you as a company?
(6) Is there a financial limitation?
   a. This should be a question asked before developing the final measures. If this is mentioned before, it will hinder an open mind by financial means. It might be possible to implement a light version of an otherwise more expensive measure.
(7) Are their negative effects on the company and the employees when implementing those measures?
   a. If so which?

Organizing brainstorming workshops, where all employees can discuss their ideas in sessions, develop them further in group works, and present them to the others to develop them further, will be key in making the measures what employees really desire. Being involved in the process helps to connect more

with the ideas and accept the measures once they are introduced. Asking an external advisory company to support the company in this process will give an outside view on the topic and help to keep emotions stable.

Conclusion

Literature shows that giving companies a framework to understand better the topic of gender inequality and to help them find measures to reach gender parity are key to success. Additionally, helping women starting their own company by giving them courses on how to become more willing to take risks can help to push their companies to the next level. Working on breaking down the borders of stereotypes our society has toward the role of men and women is essential to change women's position in the work environment. The interviews showed that education should provide girls with the perspective to enter a male-dominated field and through this overcome society's predefined perceptions of those fields. To break through the glass ceiling that persists in gender and other inequalities it is important that men and women conjointly try to change it, not with implementing quotas, but by talking about it and raising awareness. Information and knowledge are the most valuable tools there are to change people's perspectives. More studies can be conducted to better understand the topics of equality, work–life balance measures, and reasons for the limited number of women in certain positions and fields.

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Disclosure statement

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