

Between the glass ceiling and the sticky floor: subtle barriers

THE LACK OF SUPPORTING MENTORS, POWERFUL ADVOCATES AND INSIGHTFUL ROLE MODELS AS WELL AS THE EXCLUSION FROM MALE-DOMINATED NETWORKS HAVE BEEN WELL DOCUMENTED AS IMPEDING WOMEN'S PROGRESSION TO THE TOP. YET, WE HAVE ONLY RECENTLY COME TO REALISE THAT OUR PERFORMANCE AND EVALUATION SYSTEMS ARE DEEPLY GENDERED IN THEIR NATURE, WRITES **DR CLAUDIA JONCZYK-SÉDÈS**, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ORGANISATION STUDIES AT **ESCP EUROPE BUSINESS SCHOOL**

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that merit-based pay practices in particular may fail to achieve gender neutral outcomes, showing that women and minorities (in the same job and work unit, with the same supervisor, and the same human capital) received lower salary increases than white men, even after they are given the same performance evaluation score (Castilla, 2008). What seems even more puzzling is that when an organisation is explicitly presented as meritocratic, individuals in managerial positions favour a male employee over an equally qualified female employee by awarding him a larger monetary reward, a finding that has become to be known as the 'meritocracy paradox'.

Looking for the root causes of these unintended behaviours, recent evidence suggests that gender biases are automatically activated as soon as evaluators learn the sex of a person. These biases lead to unintentional and implicit discrimination by triggering unconscious schematas that are deeply rooted in early education and our own upbringing. From a very young age, parents and teachers signal and convey to us, sometimes explicitly, but mostly implicitly what is seen as appropriate behaviour. 'Being a good girl' is ascribed to be obedient, friendly and helpful, yet not to be competitive, assertive or 'too smart'. Other attributions made are that men are better at maths and women are better at verbal exercises. It is much later that these deeply ingrained mental models come into play when we evaluate workplace performance, leading to practices and patterns that favour men and create structural career blocks for women.

Stereotype-based beliefs that women need to be protected, sometimes labelled as 'benevolent sexism' have been identified for limiting women's exposure to challenging assignments. Such subtle forms of gender



bias, which are deeply ingrained in workplace culture and society at large, while unintentional, explain why highly qualified women enter professional service firms such as consulting, law and auditing firms in nearly equal numbers as men, yet do not make it to partner level in important numbers: The implicitly held image of the 'ideal leader' implies the need to fit a prevailing masculine model of

success for promotion to partnership. Interestingly, even if women adapt male patterns of behaviour and try to fit with the image of the ideal worker they are likely to face backlash due to gender stereotypes. Women who affirm themselves can be seen as abrasive instead of assertive, arrogant instead of self-confident, and self-promoting instead of entrepreneurial. Research shows that in contrast to their male colleagues women who negotiate hard for themselves are evaluated negatively.

Are there any remedies? Attempts to decrease the role of gender biases in the evaluation of candidates have included blind evaluation procedures (e.g. the gender composition of top orchestras only started to change considerably with the introduction of 'blind auditions'), and gender quotas on hiring and promotion committees. To avoid gender stereotyping in promotion decisions and job assignments candidate evaluations 'by the bunch' have proven to be effective: employees are more likely to be selected based on their performance when evaluated jointly and more likely to be selected based on their gender when evaluated separately. While I am not a fan of quotas it seems clear that as long as we do not see a critical number of women in leadership positions we do not associate leadership with women. And without women in high places, younger women lack the role models and mentors to help them succeed. In any case, organisations will need to think about the 'genderness' of their HR practices and their staff composition. ■