Gender Matters; are the gaps closing?

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The Gender Matters project, established in 2018 by the Academy for Gender, Work and Leadership, aims to address enduring gender gaps at work. This year, the project has focused on the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought for women as they tried to work and simultaneously manage their personal lives in such a challenging context.

The project has been attracting momentum with a recent event on February 16th held at Lancaster University. At this event Prof Valerie Stead, Dr Lara Pecis and Melanie Wilkes discussed the persisting inequalities in the labour market and the impact of insecurity on working women, and women from ethnic minority backgrounds in particular, with an audience including academics, researchers, practitioners, and students.

Introducing the current status of gender (in)equality in the UK labour market, Valerie Stead and Lara Pecis presented an overview of key contemporary workplace gender equality challenges, including issues around the gender pay gap, leadership pipeline and managing work and family commitments and the entwined effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The resultant cost of living crisis, the increasing work insecurity gap (with women being 1.8 times more likely than men to experience severely insecure work), the dip in the rate of women's participation in the labour market, are amongst some of the effects which are surfacing in the post pandemic era. The pandemic has made it even more difficult to navigate caring responsibilities, positioning women in more precarious contexts. The talk also highlighted that women's progression into leadership roles appears to grow at a slow rate with women representing only 8% of FTSE 100 CEOs.

Melanie Wilkes presented The Work Foundation research on insecure work to reinforce how gender inequalities in the labour market connect with women's slow progression into leadership roles and stable employment opportunities, and directed the discussion towards the positioning of women, and especially women from ethnic minority backgrounds, into severely insecure work.

The event participants discussed key organisational and policy challenges and proposed several recommendations to address gender inequalities in workplaces, as follows:

1. *Dismantle gender-based bias on professions and University areas of study*: There is the need to increase the representation and contribution of women in the workplace at the ground level, especially in traditionally male-dominated professions. Practical actions to achieve this goal could be to promote campaigns that aim at disassociating certain disciplines and university degrees with gendered and racial assumptions, checking that questions during recruitment

interviews are free from gendered assumptions and bias and, revisiting organisational policies on paid parental leave for both parents. To increase the chances of women progressing into leadership roles, organisations could provide mentoring and developmental opportunities to aid progression in their career, including a focus on C-Suite roles.

2. *It's not only a woman's problem*: It was also found to be equally important to stimulate conversations with men who can be allies in tackling inequalities in the workplace. Discussions around the lack of involvement of men in gender and diversity conversations was highlighted, with the tendency for gender-related events to be a women's only focus.

3. *Make childcare affordable*: Widening access to free/affordable childcare and day care facilities to ease the burden of child care responsibilities that often lay on women's shoulders. This has been considered a key point for policy makers to address.

While gender equality and inclusion are often promoted as a given in organisations, contemporary workplaces still face challenges including the gender pay gap, women being locked out of progression, and trying to create a balance between their personal and professional lives. With the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the shape of the labour market, and the recent cost of living crisis increasing employment precarity, organisations still have a long way to go to provide a nurturing, supportive and equitable environment.

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