

Building a Fairer City action plan

2nd November 2023, 9:00am to 12:30pm

Streets of Growth, Hayloft Point, 6 Middlesex Street, London E1 7EX

Accelerating the pace of change in developing an inclusive workforce: Gender

Learning note

On the 2nd of November 2023, the Greater London Authority, in collaboration with The Fawcett Society and Shared Intelligence ran an event focussed on how organisations can accelerate the pace of change in developing an inclusive workforce.

This event was part of a series of three challenge events centred around a specific provocation:

“Are positive action and hard targets coupled with accountability at all levels the way forward to step up the pace on underrepresentation?”

The discussion with attendees at the event and the presentations of key speakers highlighted three key areas to be considered by all organisations in accelerating the pace of change: contextualising data, going beyond the law and taking the pressure to act away from women.

One of the key messages from the event which frames the following themes is that often, there is an expectation that new lessons, ideas and innovation will be the catalyst for change. However, the levers below are not new, and they may be familiar. The key to change is how to encourage organisations to commit to drawing on these levers to make the change.

Contextualising data

Data is essential to understanding the issues behind gender underrepresentation in the workforce and the business case for action. The tendency has been to focus on headline figures, like the headline in gender pay gap reporting. But organisations need to go beyond the headline figures and interrogate the story behind the data to know where the issues exist and therefore where action needs to be taken. Although there are more women in the workforce than ever before, many of these roles are still not equal to those of male counterparts. Interrogating the nature of work and the level of pay is crucial to understanding the issues within an organisation, and how to tackle them.

Gender pay gap

It is estimated that it will take decades to close the gender pay gap and understanding the nature of the pay gap requires looking under the headlines of the data. Women are more likely to have caring responsibilities, work in part-time jobs or

take career breaks due to maternity and parental leave. All of these are contributors to the gender pay gap. Looking beyond the initial headlines of the pay gap and diving into the nature of the pay gap allows for organisations to work towards targeted approaches to improving the workplace. Solutions highlighted include flexible working and shared parental leave.

Shining a light on intersectionality

There are many common themes in the experiences of women, but not all women share the same experience. Often women with other protected characteristics experience greater disadvantage. For instance, women with disabilities experience a greater pay gap than able women, and disabled women from minority ethnic backgrounds often experience higher unemployment rates. Furthermore, sexual harassment in the workplace impacts people with compounded protected characteristics more. Data should be used to expand the focus on 'women' and should shine a spotlight on the impact of the intersectionality of gender and other protected characteristics. By using this data, organisations can support groups with multiple protected characteristics better by understanding the unique and different barriers that they face.

There is scope to support organisations to better understand their gender pay gap data and the issues that may be causing the gap.

The law is the floor

The law is not a magic bullet. Organisations should consider it only as a foundation for taking action.

Positive Action

The definition of positive action has a very specific meaning and is not the same as positive discrimination.

The Equality Act 2010 supports positive action through two sections to reduce disadvantage, meet different needs and increase participation.

- “General (section 158): This involves proportionate actions which are designed to meet the 3 aims above. This could include, for example, providing a leadership scheme to help an underrepresented group achieve more senior positions in an organisation or providing tailored training for a group because they have specific requirements.
- Recruitment or promotion (section 159): This involves actions that reduce disadvantage and/or increase representation specifically when it comes to deciding between equally qualified candidates. For example, hiring one candidate over another equally qualified one because the former has a certain protected characteristic that is underrepresented in the workforce. Other activities which are related to recruitment (for example, jobs fairs targeted at ethnic minority groups), but do not involve choosing between candidates, fall under the 'general' (section 158) provisions.”

These definitions are narrow, and their use is very limited. Positive action can be used as a tool for progression, but organisations should go far beyond the law.

For instance, ensuring that the recruitment process is supporting women to get into work is crucial and positive action can be used to help with outreach to underrepresented communities. Retaining staff is also crucial and mentoring and leadership schemes can be used in tandem with the law to progress women in the workforce. Using a weighting system in recruitment which accounts for the journey or disadvantage candidates have faced can help to improve levels of underrepresentation.

There is scope to continue developing organisations' understanding of the law and its uses and limitations in progressing an inclusive workforce.

Fix the culture, not the women

Often the burden is put on women to make necessary changes to their own roles or behaviours in order to make work suitable for them, but this does not address the wider systemic issues women face. Everyone in an organisation has a role to play in creating a more inclusive workplace.

Senior leadership

Senior leadership buy-in is crucial in fundamentally changing the culture of an organisation and taking the burden off women. Clear, shared commitments from senior leadership, and accountability for progress against those commitments, are also fundamental components to ensuring prioritise for change are embedded throughout the organisation, not just in isolated pockets. Furthermore, changing the criteria of what success looks like, so that different models of leadership can be valued, allows women to thrive without having to change their working habits to fit the organisation.

There is scope for further support on how to achieve senior leadership buy-in on tackling gender underrepresentation in the workplace.

Allyship

Allyship, where representatives who are not part of a marginalised group advocate, support, and take action, is crucial for making systemic change. A specific example of this is any and every employee taking responsibility for calling out sexual harassment in the workplace. Reporting and calling out sexual harassment in the workplace are difficult for victims and often the systems in place put the burden of reporting on victims rather than supporting them. Therefore, allyship and supporting victims of sexual harassment to call out bad behaviour, sexism and misogyny in the workplace can help relieve some of the burden to shifting workplace culture.

Training

Training for managers and staff can highlight the roles and responsibilities of every employee in removing the barriers and tackling the issues women face in the workforce. One area that this can be particularly useful is in supporting people who want to start families, something that disproportionately affects women. By engaging in training about the impacts of motherhood and the motherhood penalty, workplaces

can become better equipped to support young families through policy and culture changes.

Helpful Resources

Visit the GLA's Building a Fairer City Hub for more helpful resources and toolkits:

<https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-mayor-does/priorities-london/londons-recovery-coronavirus-crisis/london-partnership-board/building-fairer-city-hub>