





YOU ONLY GOT THIS JOB BECAUSE YOU ARE A **WOMAN**

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*Can women climb the academic ladder? In a society that equates men with leadership, **THINK** explores the career challenges faced by women, especially in academia, and how governments and institutions are fighting to promote gender equity.*

Indulge me while I ask you to imagine a president, a scientist, or a leader. What images came to your mind? Were any of those figures a woman?

According to the World Economic Forum, in 2022, 42% of leadership roles in the world were occupied by women. Not only were women underrepresented, but Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union (EU), reports that in 2021, women in the EU earned on average 12.1% less than their male counterparts.

Underrepresentation and inequality in the workforce is also present in academia. At UM, although 60% of students are female, only 41% of those studying at Ph.D. level on a full-time basis were women in 2022. In 2020-21, just 22.2% of full-time professors were female.

Gender quotas are being recommended by the National Gender Equality and Mainstreaming Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that 'at least 40% of appointments ➤

made to officially designated bodies are women'. Initially, when gender quotas are introduced to mitigate systemic structural inequality, it sparks ongoing debates in countries which do not support gender equality (which might explain why so little has been attained in this area).

IS MERITOCRACY A LIE?

With mandatory gender quotas in place, claims like 'You only got this job because you are a woman' are plentiful and stem from the belief in meritocracy – a system where one gets selected, promoted, and awarded because of their skills and accomplishments. The problem is that we may not be as meritocratic as we think.

According to the Chair of the Gender Equality and Sexual Diversity Committee at UM, Prof. JosAnn Cutajar from the Faculty of Social Wellbeing, 'Meritocracy is a lie due to unconscious bias.' For example, according to a 2007 paper by Prof. Uhlmann and Prof. Cohen, men that considered themselves to be impartial were shown to be more likely to hire a man instead of a similarly qualified woman.

These biases are drilled into us through socialisation – how our parents raised us, what we see on television, and what we hear from our neighbours and friends. Human brains use previous information to create patterns and predict outcomes, and this allows us to navigate the world and make decisions. But it also creates inaccurate assumptions.

Studies show that, in the professional world, there is a clear bias: male is perceived as better. Men are thought to be better leaders: strong, assertive, rational, and reliable. Women are seen as weaker, more emotional. When women try to assert

themselves, they are often seen as aggressive, bossy, and irrational.

Selectors may unconsciously see male applicants as the better fit for a job even when their qualifications are similar to female candidates. Men are also more often rewarded with bonuses, even when their performance is similar to a woman's. In academia, women are less likely to receive funding. Are men chosen because they are the best fit for the role or simply because they are men?

Nonetheless, Cutajar believes that big companies are starting to realise the importance of diversity in the workplace. 'Workforces and clients are diverse, so they need to understand how different clients and employees work,' she explains.

THE BURDEN OF UNPAID WORK

Data analysis carried out by the UM Equity Office shows that the majority of women pursuing a Ph.D. do so on a part-time basis. Cutajar wonders if this choice is a reflection of women's family responsibilities. While the peak age of female enrollment for full-time Ph.D. candidates is 22, male enrollment peaks at 25 and 29. The hypothesis is that women start their Ph.D. earlier so that they can complete their studies before starting a family. They are also more likely to enrol on a part-time basis at a later stage – this enables them to balance work, study, and family responsibilities.

In career paths within academia, choosing to study and work part time has overarching consequences. Fewer hours translates to fewer papers, fewer teaching opportunities, and lower metrics, which then affects whether candidates are considered for certain roles like tenure or leading labs.

Women often have to pause their careers when they have children. In Malta, while both parents have a right to parental leave (up to four months per parent until the child reaches the age of eight: two months at sick leave rate and two months unpaid), maternity leave is 14 weeks (fully paid) plus 4 weeks paid at sick leave level for women vs 10 days for men. This difference once again

highlights how society imposes gender roles – women are expected to shoulder the majority of parental duties, while men are expected to work. This is an unfair assumption for both men and women, stealing a father's time with a newborn and hindering a mother's career. Furthermore, this can prevent women from being eligible for promotions, stomp salary progression, prevent access to training courses, conferences, and studies, and even decrease pensions.

If women have less time to invest in their career, how can they keep up with their male counterparts? Do we give more importance to paid work than unpaid work? And how can meritocracy be a fair system when it blatantly ignores fundamental, invisible work?

DRIVING EQUITY

Women are underrepresented in the workforce, a direct result from either unconscious bias when choosing an applicant or unfair social conditions that block women from dedicating as much time to their work.

Representation quotas are trying to level the playing field, but they are not a perfect system. These measures require a minimum number of women in government offices, committees, and boards. The idea is that increasing the representation of women at the



decision-making level helps challenge gender norms and unequal power relations that disadvantage women. However, women's physical presence in decision-making is not enough; there needs to be a substantive presence – around 40% of committee/board members. When this amount is attained, research has shown that it leads to the transformation of the institution or company. Women's substantive presence gives women a voice and the power to bring about change, which ideally leads to systemic gender mainstreaming of the processes, practices, and systems which bring about gender equality.

Some critics argue that those who make it into politics or decision-making roles through these schemes did not make it on their own steam – ie, because of their qualifications, experience, and/or acumen. The issue is that, without quotas, women who have the same capabilities and qualifications as men are not chosen due to unconscious bias. Some critics might feel that certain men will be replaced when quotas are introduced. They believe that 'These individuals are no more responsible for past injustices or for rectifying present inequalities than any other individuals. It is unfair that they should bear the full burden of compensation.'

Opinions are split in regards to the efficacy of gender quotas. According to a Times of Malta article from 2016, 71% of women and 78% of men believed that gender quotas were not essential to achieve gender balance.

Although some may argue that preferential treatment may counteract the historical unfair advantage of privileged groups, I (the author) would argue this is unfair to new generations. Why does an 18 year old white male

have to pay for the discriminatory actions of a white male in a senior position? Yes, there needs to be a social change to empower women and eliminate gender bias, but we shouldn't disregard the consequences of gender quotas for deserving male candidates. Yet, Cutajar brings another perspective: 'Quotas jump start equality. They ensure that there are women in leadership, which may change the minds of people that have unconscious bias regarding women.'

BEYOND QUOTAS

The quota system was put in place to counteract the bias that discriminates against capable women. However women are now being accused of getting chosen solely because of being women. Quotas are an imperfect system that do not address the complexity of gender discrimination. But if not quotas, what other methods can promote equality in the workplace?

The key may be to ensure the balance between male and female responsibilities both inside and outside the workspace. Research conducted at UM shows areas that still need to be improved to assure gender equality: 'access to equal pay for work of equal value, equitable sharing in household and family responsibilities, and the need to increase women's presence in decision-making roles'. The same article mentions that increasing representation of women in decision-making roles can help reduce gender gaps.

At UM, an equity action plan is being implemented to 'address any structural, cultural and/or situational barriers, to facilitate the participation of the diverse population'. The Gender+ Equity plan, as it is called,

is thus a way to promote gender equality beyond quotas. The goals include increasing the number of women (alongside other underrepresented groups) in governance positions. It considers, for example, the training of staff on gender equality issues, evaluation of current policies at the university (like the sexual harassment policy), and tools that enable work-life balance.

The objective is to bring about a gradual change in policies and measures to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion. There is no simple solution to ensure gender equality, but being aware of the hurdles women face and taking an active role in dismantling our unconscious bias are steps that we can take to ensure a more equitable future. So next time you hear that someone only got the job because they are a woman, speak out. **T**

Editor's Note: This article focuses on gender inequality. Discrimination is also faced by other vulnerable groups. The unconscious bias that defines the ideal candidate as male, specifically also defines him as white, heterosexual, and male presenting. Women from other minority groups are especially underrepresented in the workforce and face extra social difficulties. Queer people, especially those who are non-binary, are also underrepresented in leadership roles. The complexity of their experiences and the stigma they face were not addressed in this article.

A full list of references will be available on the digital version of the article at thinkmagazine.mt