Calling time on gender inequality
A gender equality survey on public finance
Introduction

Public Finance by Women (PFW) is a new global organisation established to promote gender equality in public services, specifically in the area of public finance, and to support women during their careers by providing mentoring and other support services to them.

At an early stage we identified a need for more data about gender equality in public finance as explained in our strategy document (www.publicfinancebywomen.org) and we strongly believe that it is only when we have robust data that we will be informed as to whether or not women are breaking through the glass ceiling in sufficient numbers. Also, we will be better placed to understand the root causes of inequality. The latter is important because research in this area could improve the targeting of the causes of inequality and potentially lead to different design solutions.

To promote debate about gender equality and identify potential areas for future research, PFW conducted a survey in October 2019, to test the temperature of how gender equality is advancing and identify what would be the best forms of support and advice to help women succeed in their careers. This publication outlines the survey results: a summary of the methodology and a breakdown of the response group can be found in the Appendix.

Executive Summary

Of the 107 respondents to our survey, from 22 countries, 69% indicated they had experienced some form of gender discrimination during their careers.

The top three areas of gender discrimination experienced by respondents to our survey were unconscious bias in the workplace, biased recruitment, selection and promotion processes, and unsupportive line management.

Sixteen percent of female respondents had experienced age discrimination.

Seventeen percent of female respondents identified sexual harassment as an issue.

59% of respondents felt that gender equality is advancing, while 23% disagreed, and 18% didn’t know. At face value this seems an encouraging response, but without comparative data we do not know whether this indicates a real improvement. Equally, the combined score of 41% of ‘no’ and ‘don’t knows’ represents a significant percentage of the feedback and warrants further research.

Unbiased recruitment, selection and promotion processes were identified by 51% of respondents as the top enabling factors helping women to succeed, whereas positive organisational cultures which embed inclusion and diversity were identified as the second top enabler.

Gender quotas and gender targets for women leaders were seen as the least helpful enablers supporting women’s careers. However, the survey did not distinguish between voluntary and non-voluntary targets and quotas.

Mentoring and coaching were identified by 50% of respondents as the most popular forms of support. Professional networks followed closely behind. Skills development, such as developing leadership skills and having personal development plans were also considered important for career development.

55% of respondents identified changing cultural mindsets and beliefs as important so that women as talent can be developed. 43% opted for finding ways to better educate and influence those recruiting to leadership positions (the gatekeepers). Again, introducing quotas for women in leadership positions was a less popular mechanism, with targets for women in leadership positions being even less popular below the direct lobbying of governments to bring about change.
Key Findings

Views on gender discrimination in public finance

107 respondents (both females and males) were asked whether or not they had experienced gender discrimination during their careers, 69 (64%) replied affirmatively. All of the respondents who indicated that they had experienced gender discrimination were female with the exception of one male respondent. Without any comparative or historic information, it is difficult to know whether gender discrimination is getting worse or is improving. But whatever the direction of travel, it is a poor result that warrants further investigation so as to gain a better understanding about the underlying causes and how to tackle them.

Graph 1: Experience of gender discrimination

Respondents were questioned whether they had experienced gender discrimination and what form it took. They were asked to identify all applicable answers and were given an option to tick ‘not applicable’ if they had not experienced gender discrimination during their careers.

The chart below highlights the most significant forms of gender discrimination (whether real or perceived) experienced by predominantly female respondents. Unconscious bias, biased recruitment and promotion processes, and having an unsupportive boss were identified as the top three areas of discrimination experienced. One respondent commented:

“Unconscious bias in line managers and leaders is the biggest impediment to growth and development.”

These forms of discrimination were closely followed by poor organisational cultures and unequal pay. Sixteen percent of respondents identified age discrimination as a problem, whereas 17% identified sexual harassment as an issue.

Graph 2: Types of gender discrimination experienced

Other comments made by respondents included gender discrimination because of pregnancy, being overlooked as a woman leading on a project because of a male dominated environment and culture, and women not supporting other women in the workplace.

The data above does not indicate whether these issues are improving or getting worse. However, they highlight that gender discrimination in its many forms is still prevalent.
The advancement of gender equality in public finance

When respondents were asked whether gender equality was advancing in public finance, 59% of respondents felt that gender equality is advancing, 23% disagreed, and 18% didn’t know. At face value it seems an affirmative response. However, the significant percentage of negative responses and ‘don’t knows’ deserves further investigation.

Graph 3: Gender equality advancing in public finance

Some of the comments received, reproduced below, provide an indication as to why they think gender equality is advancing.

“It is more and more young women enter the workforce and have promising careers.”

“Albeit very slowly, there are more women in senior positions, yet there is a lot more that needs to be done.”

“Both genders should know that they have equal opportunity to succeed in their careers and professional aspirations.”

“There have been national and sub-national efforts around gender-responsive planning and budgeting in countries around the world over the last decade and longer, as well requirements to require some governments to prepare gender budget statements, including local gender budget statements. These have had some success.”

Comments that were less positive included:

“Public finance is still regarded as male expertise. In our organisation this is seen in the practices of promoting male colleagues instead of females. It can be seen in the ways people talk about the expertise of male colleagues compared to expertise of female colleagues.”

“The PFM space is still very patriarchal, and this needs a very strong push.”

“There is still more to do at senior levels.”

“In Pakistan, people hide behind religion to attack women at work. The situation never improves.”

“Interests of all genders are increasingly taken into account in policy planning, including budgeting. There is an abundance of women public-finance professionals. However, there remains a gap when it comes to top leadership gender balance.”

“While I don’t think I’ve been disadvantaged because I’m a female, I haven’t had children and, in my opinion, I would have been treated differently if I had.”

Enabling factors helping women succeed in their careers

Respondents were asked to identify three top enabling factors for helping women succeed in their careers. Unbiased recruitment, selection and promotion processes were the most popular choice, opted for by 51% of respondents, followed by positive organisational cultures that embed inclusion and diversity, chosen by 49%. These were closely followed by personal confidence and self-belief and flexible working. A respondent commented:

“Gender inequality is also a consequence of lack of facilities and services supporting women and families. This may be solved in a shorter period time compared to cultural changes.”

Graph 4: Top enabling factors helping women to succeed
Gender quotas and targets for women leaders were seen as overwhelmingly unhelpful for supporting women to succeed as leaders. Only 9% and 10% of respondents thought quotas and targets were helpful. However, the survey did not distinguish between voluntary and mandatory targets or quotas. Perhaps the most interesting result is that only 6% of respondents thought that a radical change in religious and cultural beliefs were enabling factors.

Top three types of support for women during their careers

Respondents were asked to identify their top three forms of support that would be helpful for developing women’s careers. Mentoring and coaching were identified by 50% of respondents as the most popular forms of support. Professional networks closely followed these. Skills development, such as honing leadership skills and having personal development plans were also considered important.

Targeted training was considered less important for women than targeted education and training for young women. Gender targets and quotas were considered the least important form of support by respondents, 25% and 23% respectively, when compared to other forms of support. Comments received from respondents included:

“The key to supporting women in their careers is flexibility and telework offered by employers for both women and their spouses.”

“I believe gender equality of pay is not as big an issue as portrayed in the media. The problem is juggling personal and work life. Flexible working patterns and target-based work would be better for female development. The current 9-5 environment is not helpful.”

How gender equality can be advanced in public finance

Respondents were asked how gender equality can be advanced in public finance and to give their top three preferences. 55% of respondents identified changing cultural mindsets and beliefs so that women as a talent can be developed. Nearly 43% opted to find better ways to educate and influence those recruiting to leadership positions (the gatekeepers). Introducing quotas for women in leadership positions was not popular with targets for women in leadership positions being even less popular, below direct lobbying of governments.

Graph 5: Favoured types of career development support

Graph 6: How gender equality can be advanced
As set our below, comments received from respondents help to unpick the some of their choices above.

“The focus should be on meeting women’s developmental needs rather than forcing quotas/targets/equality.”

“Attention needs to be paid to valuing the ‘softer’ qualities & skills that women, in particular, can bring to leadership & management. At the moment, to be successful in many areas, women have to conform to male/masculine behaviours & values OR they think they do.”

“Gender mainstreaming is key in public finance. Since the budgeting and policymaking are political processes, having the ‘political will’ can help ensure mainstreaming is achieved to some extent.”

“Role models and media coverage of female public finances’ careers would help shape the societal image of the sector.”

“I think that what counts is the talent not the gender itself. Where there are differences in gender that should be considered as value added to the work in the field of public finance. Women should have the same opportunities and equal access and treatment as men so that talented women can succeed.”

Conclusion

Gender equality in leadership has the potential to strengthen a country’s competitiveness and economic development. Yet, despite women making up over half of the global population, they have been long overlooked as a vital talent. The survey results highlight that gender inequality exists in public finance and there are a number of challenges that need to be overcome if women are to make inroads in public finance by reaching leadership positions. We need to call time on gender inequality in public finance by investing in data and research to better understand the root causes of inequality and improve the way we target those causes of inequality and potentially design new solutions.

Mainstreaming gender equality is critical for providing an equal playing field for both women and men. It is not about ‘fixing the women’. As the results of the survey suggest, the focus should be on changing cultures and mindsets and addressing areas that constitute specific barriers to equality treatment, such as unconscious bias and biased recruitment and promotion processes. Whilst the survey also highlighted that the direction of travel is positive, there is still much further to go if we are to wipe out gender discrimination in public finance completely.

Appendix

Methodology – Online survey

An online survey was rolled out in October 2019 to capture views about how gender equality is progressing in public finance. The survey provides a snapshot of current views on a range of issues, including gender discrimination, the advancement of gender equality and ideas about what forms of support would help women succeed in their careers in this important sector. The survey provides a snapshot of views of a self-selected individuals and, therefore, should not be considered a representative sample.

The survey was made available through social media, such as LinkedIn and Twitter and e-mailed directly to a global network of contacts. Individuals (females and males) were asked only to respond if they worked in public finance. The questions were largely qualitative, and some questions provided a range of response options, with the opportunity to provide additional feedback. The key areas addressed included the following:

- Experience of gender discrimination
- Views on whether gender equality is advancing in public finance
- Identification of the enabling factors that would help women succeed in their careers
- Views on how gender equality can be advanced in public finance
- Opinions about what forms of support would be helpful to women’s careers.

A total of 107 survey responses were received. To be able to further analyse the responses received to the survey in terms of gender, age and country participants were given the option to complete these questions. The three tables below provide more detail about those respondents that chose to provide this information.

Gender

Females represented the largest proportion of respondents that chose to complete this question - 88% female opposed to 12% for males.
Age

The largest proportion of respondents were within the age ranges between 35 – 54 with few responses over the age of 65 and nil response under 24.

Country

Individuals from 22 a diverse number of countries responded to the survey. The UK and US had the largest number of respondents.

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