

No Equality in Sight for Women in Public Relations?

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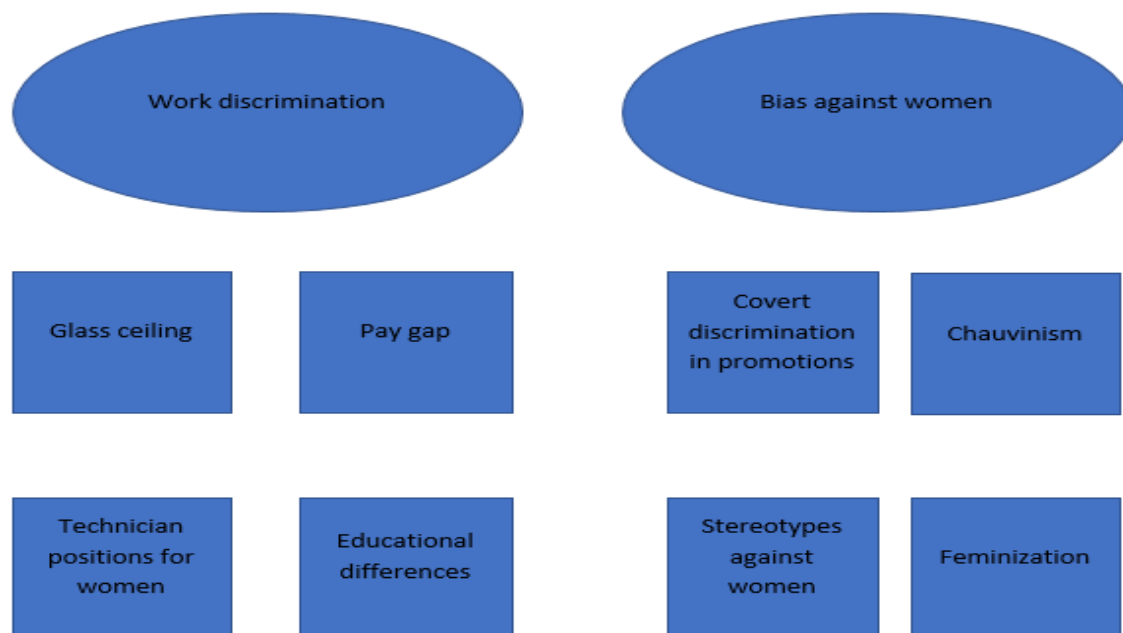
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Even though women in public relations form the majority of employees, are more likely to come to the industry with a public relations degree and generally show the ability to create good relations with clients, they still face pay gap, glass ceiling and general masculine culture in public relations organisations. While in advertising and journalism, for example, this discrimination is openly enforced (Topić & Bruegmann, 2020; Topić, 2019), in public relations it is implied (Topić, 2020), however, the reality is that women's progress is impeded by numerous factors.

A literature review I conducted with colleagues from several European countries showed that scholars systematically report discrimination of women in public relations (Topić et al, 2019). This research is largely based on research on practitioners, and thus analysed literature shows a situation in the public relations industry across four decades.

The analysis of the literature revealed that the discrimination has reached a full circle and that issues that women faced during the 1980s have returned on the agenda during the last few years (namely, in the period from 2010 to mid-2019). For example, during the 1980s, women faced work discrimination and bias, and these practices were manifested in the glass ceiling, pay gap, the fact women were only able to occupy technical positions (e.g. press release and other writing, working with clients but not managing staff), covert discrimination in promotions (e.g. by inventing new positions for men), chauvinism, stereotypes against women and all this happened despite women being more educated and arriving at the industry with a public relations degree (graph 1).

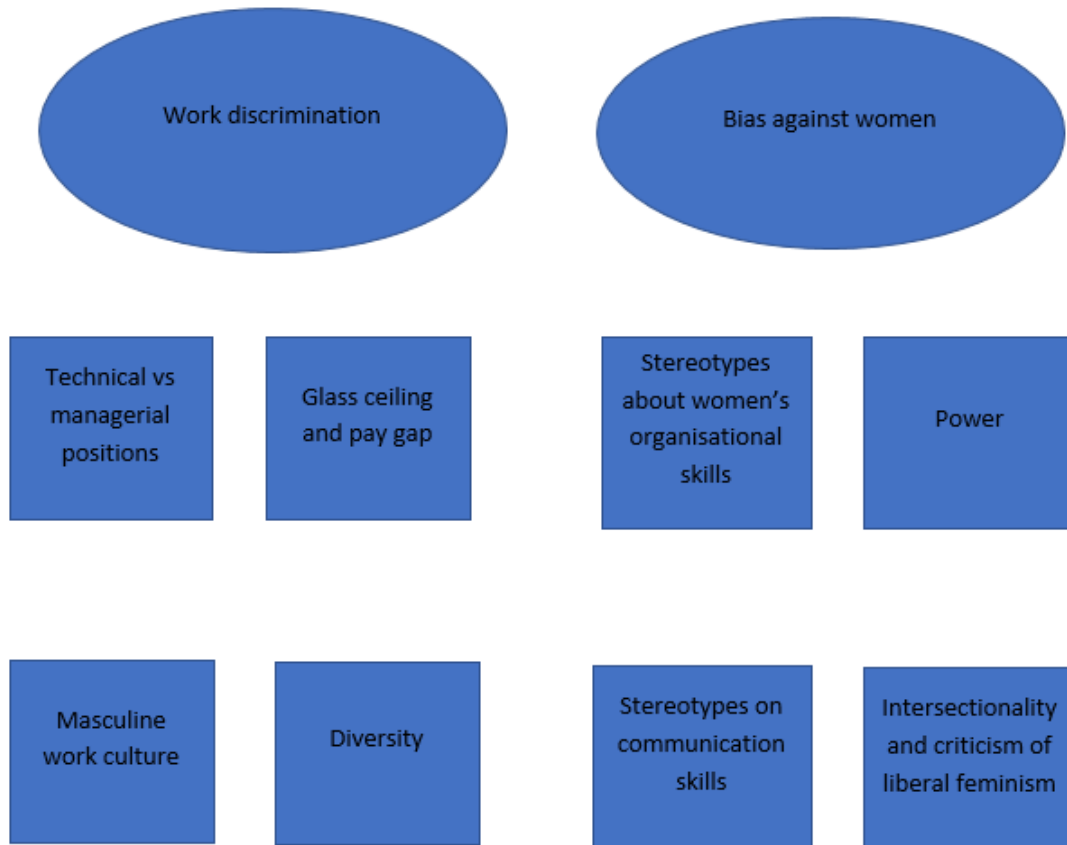
Graph 1. Issues women faced during the 1980s



Source: Topić et al, 2019, p. 16

However, while the logical conclusion was, following the initial literature review, that the situation surely has to be better since 2010 onwards, the analysed literature paints a different picture. Therefore, an analysis of the last period has shown that women again face work discrimination and bias, and the issue they face are still the pay gap, glass ceiling, being confined to technical positions, however, as the research progressed new issues have been identified, such as masculine work culture and the lack of diversity in organisations. Stereotypes emerged again and the research recognises the lack of power. In other words, even when women hold positions they do not always have the power, and women generally feel powerless within public relations organisations. Nevertheless, bias against women seems to have risen to include stereotypes on women having better communication skills and thus having to stay in technical positions, and some researchers opened the issue of intersectionality (graph 2).

Graph 2. Issues women faced in the recent period (2010-2019)



Source: Topić et al, 2019, p. 29

The EUPRERA project is now in the second phase where the team is researching women in public relations in each country represented in the project, England, France, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Georgia and we have recently signed a partnership with Women in Public Relations – North America organisations, which will research the position of women in the United States and Canada.

This comparative research will shed the light on the lived experiences of women working in public relations (and thus contribute to the existing knowledge that has been continually produced since the 1980s), the office culture and leadership, or two topics which are less explored in public relations scholarship.

In that, we are particularly looking into cultural masculinities and the so-called bloke-ification, or whether women who embrace masculine communication and behaviour succeed faster and do better in the industry than women who show, what is usually perceived as feminine characteristic (Mills, 2014; 2017; North, 2009; 2009b). We are using Bourdieuvian

approach to the analysis and thus asking whether the public relations industry is, despite feminisation, a masculine habitus. Bourdieu's theory is particularly useful because he identifies several issues such as masculine domination and the fact masculine way of doing things are embedded in the society to the point women do not even perceive oppression as it is so normalised and incorporated into everyday life (Bourdieu, 2007).

The latter focus of the research stems from work on women in journalism. For example, it is a common knowledge that journalism remains a masculine profession where standards of work such as newsgathering techniques and the way newsrooms operate have not changed even with a significant arrival of women to journalism (Lofgren-Nilsson, 2010; Ross, 2001; Lobo et al, 2017; Sieghart & Henry, 1998; Franks, 2013). Therefore, scholars warn about an expectation that a journalist is a man with no family commitments and long work hours and lack of free time are the norm, which has not changed much since the early days (Franks, 2013). Gallagher (2002) warned about laddish culture in newsrooms which makes women uncomfortable whereas Mills (2014) stated that senior women who manage to progress in journalism "become so bloke-ified by the macho water in which they swim that many younger women looking up don't see them as role models for the kind of women they might want to become" (p.19).

In a study I conducted in 2019, women working in journalism also reported unfavourable work conditions, masculine culture in the newsrooms, having to be like men to succeed and inherent sexism (Topić & Bruegmann, 2020). Besides, in my study of bylines in the British press on health reporting (Topić, 2018) I asked whether women from health sections are not bloke-ified enough to write on health in the news section. In other words, women have historically brought topics such as health, food and lifestyle to newspapers (Christmas, 1997; Delano, 2003; Janes, 2011; Franks, 2013), however, once health came to the agenda and joined the news, it appears that women have not moved to news section along with their traditional topic but that this became the realm of men (Topić, 2018). Nevertheless, North (2009; 2009b) argued that men in journalism do not join the newsroom culture but rather, they constitute the culture.

These debates fit into the radical feminist paradigm that argues that women fundamentally have different interests than men and do things differently (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Yule, 2006), and thus this approach will now be applied to women in public relations where we will research whether women in public relations also face the same issues

as women in journalism and advertising. These results will be promoted and publicly discussed as of September 2020.

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