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Impact Objectives

- Develop a new network of scholars working on gender inclusion
- Investigate how gender influences an individual's working conditions and success in the workplace

The Quality of Equality: Exploring Gendered Inclusion in Contemporary Organisations

An interdisciplinary seminar series offers a new approach to gender and the workplace, focusing on patterns of inclusion rather than exclusion. **Maria Adamson** talks about the network being built to explore these issues in the contemporary working world



Could you briefly introduce your team? What are your core areas of research?

We are a team of five co-investigators.

Myself, Maria Adamson (Senior Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at Middlesex University Business School), a Principal Investigator on the project, Elisabeth Kelan (Professor of Leadership at Cranfield School of Management), Patricia Lewis (Reader in Management at Kent Business School), Nick Rumens (Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Middlesex University Business School), and Martyna Śliwa (Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Essex Business School). Our expertise includes gender in organisations, workplace identities, postfeminist theorising, gender in leadership, professional work, entrepreneurship, and alternative methodologies.

How is the approach of your latest project (*Exploring Gendered Inclusion in Contemporary Organisations*) innovative? What is the difference between starting from the point of view of inclusion, rather than exclusion?

There have been calls for new ways of theorising gender in the contemporary work

context, but little sustained insight is yet available. This seminar series makes a critical and innovative contribution to debates on gender workplace inequality by offering the first platform for systematic and critical exploration and the gendered inclusion rather than exclusion in organisations.

Because women's access to paid work has been one of the top goals of the second wave feminist agenda, it is common to herald any visible increase in the number of women in organisations or the inclusion of women in traditionally male dominated work, as positive. However, numbers are not everything. We must question the simplistic binary of exclusion as negative and inclusion as always positive, because such a dichotomy obscures the complexity of women's experiences of contemporary workplace inequality. The question we need to ask now is how women are included in organisations. What categories of women are included? In which roles are they included? On which conditions? And so on. Our seminars explore these questions and 'the quality of equality' to produce a better understanding of how current patterns of inclusion may continue to (re) produce inequalities.

What have been your most striking findings so far?

It is remarkable how looking at inclusion in different work contexts critically reveals the ways in which this optimistic rhetoric obscures the problems that still exist and new ones that may arise. For example, some of the presentations have illustrated: how despite women's inclusion in most professions and occupations, they still experience discrimination but often in subtle forms that are more difficult to tackle; how in the context of leadership equality, efforts often do not go past hiring a token woman in a top position; and how fascination with individualised equality solutions like unconscious bias training or diversity training for staff, may divert attention from the more fundamental structural issues that organisations need to address to ensure gender equality.

In broad terms, what changes do organisations need to make to address the issues you mention?

We believe that in order to improve the solutions, organisations and governments need to move away from counting heads, to asking new and critical questions about the quality of gender inclusion. We need to look for systematic, structural solutions that will not only help increase the number of women, but help establish the conditions under which this dynamic is sustainable. ►

Women at work: never had it so good?

With record numbers of women in the workplace, and highly visible female role models to inspire, is the battle for equality won? A new project, *Exploring Gendered Inclusion in Contemporary Organisations*, shows how the playing field is still far from level

With 67 per cent of women in the UK now in paid employment, and a general feeling that equality in the workplace has been achieved, is it time to say the battle is over? Principal Investigator Maria Adamson at Middlesex University, London, and her co-investigators are clear that this complex organisational issue has merely moved onto its next stage. Whilst early debates on gender and the workplace focused on how women were being excluded – an issue which has improved greatly due to legislative change – it is now time, they argue, to recognise that the next step in ‘tackling gender and diversity issues in organisations is to shift our attention from numbers and targets, to the quality of gender inclusion and equality in the workplace’.

As Adamson points out, as with any complex organisational matter, gender equality efforts require constant attention and complacency can quickly become regression: ‘while some positive change has definitely taken place, equality is like driving a car up the hill – you have to keep your foot on the accelerator otherwise you’ll roll back down the hill really quickly.’

NETWORK FOR THE FUTURE

The project will build a network and community of scholars all working on this emerging critical approach to conceptualising gendered inclusion. The knowledge produced by this network will play a capacity building role for a number of different disciplines related to the theory of workplace organisation in its contemporary cultural context. As well as two journal Special Issues – one concerning the rise of moderate feminisms in organisations, and one in preparation about the quality of equality in organisations – the project runs a dedicated free podcast. An edited

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collection comprising seminar contributions will present the very newest, cutting edge research on gender and inclusion in the workplace.

The work presented in the seminars, even the more theoretical aspects, has immediate practical implications for organisations and policy makers, as Adamson explains: ‘the way we think about and the way we talk about things matter and has very real material consequences – including for employment policies.’ The seminars, attended by decision-makers such as civil servants and trade union representatives, discuss the practical implications of the critical view on inclusion and how they may be implemented in organisations. As Adamson notes, the project hopes to inject a new discourse, a new way of thinking into the current mainstream rhetoric that typically ‘emphasises purely individual rather than systematic and collective solutions for gender equality’.

Project Insights

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PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR BIO

Dr Maria Adamson is a Senior Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at Middlesex University Business School. Her research centres on understanding gender inequality in professional work, gendered workplace identities and the application of feminist theories within the field of organisation studies. Her current project explores constructions of femininity in popular business, celebrity autobiographies and business self help.

