

# Is Our House In Order?

## Exploring the Experiences of Inequality in the HR Profession

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A different view

# Objectives for the session

- To examine the continued causes of high feminisation in the HR profession
- To explore the impact in the context of the HR functions strategic impact and equality, diversity and inclusion remit
- To explore the impact on female careers in the HR profession and to provide explanations for their representation at different levels of the profession

# Mainstream views of HR



"Good morning, Human Resources. How may I demean you?"



"THERE'S NO WAY I'M GOING TO BE INTERVIEWED BY A WOMAN!"

A different view

# Views come from the historical development of 'HRM'

- Welfare Workers Association (1913)
- Industrial Welfare Workers (1924)
- Institute of Labour Management (1931)
- Institute of Personnel Management (1946)
- Institute of Personnel and Development (1994)
- Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2000)

# The increasing feminisation of the HR profession

- HR remains a highly feminised sector, and in general appears to be becoming increasingly feminised
- More than 6 in 10 people working in Human Resource Development are women
- The proportion of women is highest amongst HR administrators (80%) followed by HR officers (68%) and HR managers and directors (62%)

(Philpott, 2014)

# Does it matter that HR is heavily feminised and increasingly so?

- *Yes - when there appears to be unequal outcomes for men and women at more senior levels – comparable to other highly feminised professions*
- *Yes - as HR professionals are perceived as the guardians of equality, diversity and inclusion – why does segregation exist and what is the impact on both women and men's careers?*
- *Yes - if high feminisation is perceived as a corporate weakness - 'too nice'*

# The image 'problem'

- HR's holy grail - to have a 'seat at the table' means it can't be about soft skills and 'touchy-feely issues' – need to distance itself from the feminine
- Quote from Forbes (2011) *'HR today is different. It can't be a women-only game anymore. Your business cannot be successful unless you can develop and manage talent and take tough business decision'*
- Significant 'doing gender' issues at play

# Views from Business Blogs in relation to addressing this 'problem'

- *I think there's a perception that HR is a profession for women; one that requires a softer set of skills that many men wouldn't believe they possess nor would necessarily want to develop.*  
(<http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/how-can-we-attract-more-men-to-hr>)
- *The only thing I can see that might change this picture is if HR become more data-orientated, more technology-based, more evidence-based, more financial orientated and yes, more of a science. I was at a Workforce Analytics conference in London earlier this year and most of the participants were men. I am making a lot of assumptions here, but perhaps something like WA will change things?*  
(<https://mortenkamp.com/2013/07/15/why-are-there-so-many-women-in-hr/>)



# Doing Gender

- Feminist studies of organizations have revealed how gender is socially constructed and practiced at work... “*through the distinction between male and female, and masculine and feminine*” (Acker, 1990.p.146).
- Masculinity and femininity refer to the meanings, experiences and values of ‘being’ or in the ‘image’ of a man or women.
- Within a poststructuralist framework they are seen, as being discursively constructed and through everyday negotiation in different contexts, masculinities and femininities can be multiple and fragmented (Butler, 1990).

# What does a feminist discourse analysis reveal about careers in HR profession

- Main aim is illuminate the divergent experiences and voices of the women in the profession – often these voices are treated in a homogenous manner
- Contribute to the relatively limited research that has explored careers in the HR profession (Legge, 1987; Gooch, 1994; Thompson, 2004; Ackah and Heaton, 2003 & 2006; Brandl et al, 2008; Pichler et al, 2008; Reichel et al, 2010).
- Contributes to the small but growing body of work that has explored the roles and identities of men in female dominated professions (Williams, 1993; Lupton, 2000 & 2006; Simpson, 2004; Pullen and Simpson, 2009).
- Contribute to solutions that are not based on a deficit model and ‘women should behave more like men’

# The research

- 25 semi-structured interviews with mid-career female managers in the HR profession ‘talking about their careers’ from across industries and sectors
- The ages did vary but all had completed a CIPD Postgraduate qualification and were operating in a middle management role
- Applied a Feminist Discourse Analysis (Baxter, 2003)

# Strategic Business Partnering Discourse

- Francis and Keegan (2006) identified how the concept of business partnering dominates HR professionals 'talk' about HR practice and leads to a potential negative impact on careers paths

*"I couldn't do this role once I have a family. It means being responsive to the business 24/7. My managers know they can call me any time of day and night and I'll respond to emails at the weekend...(laughs) with some exceptions. This is what you have to do if you're going to properly support the business. I want my managers to know they can rely on me."*

*"I would have to step down from the role and probably take a specialist role. Certainly when I have a young family. (Pause) When I look at the women doing this role and more senior none of them have a family. To be honest its not always ideal now picking up the phone after 7pm but I can't imagine doing that with a family"*

# Doing 'masculine'

- There was an understanding that 'masculine' or 'strategic' behaviours were desirable and it was important to distance themselves from 'feminine' or soft HR behaviours;

*“When I get an HR assistant I can tell which ones are going to cut here. Some think they are going to come in here and HR is about helping people. They soon learn... and if they don't like it they'll leave”*

- But a complex picture not just doing masculine and feminine but they had strategies for applying both and that by doing both could be advantageous to them

# Doing 'feminine'

*"Sometimes we play good cop bad cop (referring to the manager they worked for). They will take them with me so the employee feels more supported and I can be the friendlier side of the business"*

*"Sometimes being a women helps. I think I can soften their behaviours and make them think differently about issues. Not always (laughs) but sometimes. You have to try"*

- *Women aware of the expectations of masculine and feminine roles*

*"I often think what does it say about women here if you are only judged by male standards"*

# Conflict in their own personal values and the business partnering discourse

- Conflict between their own values and the exposed values of efficacy, hard-nose business decisions;

*“The pace of change has been exhausting. We have had four years of restructuring and redundancies and I think this is starting to take its toll. Its difficult seeing colleagues you have worked with for years leave and there is very little you can do to support them...things that I would like to do to support them, things we should be doing but there is no budget and I can’t make a business case for.”*

- Duality of employee advocate and business rationale – supports previous research which has highlighted the precarious position of professionals responsible for implementing change

# Impact

- Women in the research know the importance of staying in a generalist HR role to succeed to higher levels but not convinced they can balance this with caring responsibilities
- Many talk about the lack of possibility of part-time working and being in a business facing role
- Plan or have taken a specialist or project role to afford greater opportunity for flexible working
- Or are planning to move into HR Consultancy my themselves



# Final thoughts

- Focus on the profession at the mid-career stage highlights the complex forces at play that shape women's career decisions and pathways
- Illuminates the role of professional discourses can play in women's experiences and pathways to more senior management/pay
- Important to understand the supporting factors but also challenge professional ideologies and rhetoric and consider the wider impact of these on people within the profession