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Reflections from EDI conference: Equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights in times of austerity

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# Reflections from EDI conference: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Human Rights in Times of Austerity.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report on the 2016 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Conference that was held at the University of Cyprus. The scope of the conference was to draw particular attention to human rights which, in accordance with the neoliberal agenda, are under attack by a plethora of governments worldwide, which in the past were promulgating human rights and particularly equality, diversity practices and legislation. The refugee crisis, however, reveals that EU –for example- has laid the groundwork for dismantling all past achievements in the field of equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights. Governments appear to be increasingly skeptical on launching and supporting open borders policies, whereas the rise of Europe’s far-right voices threatens the Union’s fundamental value of democracy. In such times, various questions are arisen and delegates sought to address during the conference: how are equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights issues are dealt with during times of crisis and austerity; how does the wider global economic austerity affect employees’ lives; are human rights at risk nowadays; what is the role of equality, diversity and inclusion policies amidst financial crises? The spread of papers investigated the complex relationship between equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights through a plethora of various theoretical, methodological and empirical viewpoints. Stream themes incorporated the following thematic clusters: inclusion and work: addressing the global challenges; intersectional approaches to climate change; hidden inequalities in the workplace: dignity and well-being; contemporary issues of gender equality at work; business management practices for inclusive and sustainable development; virtual reality and diversity management; talking in circles: challenging alterity with indigenous methodologies; diversity in higher education; economic crisis and austerity the risks on human and social rights at work. Furthermore, there were three keynote speeches and a doctoral colloquium.

## Inclusion in Times of Austerity and Economic Upheaval

The first keynote speech was addressed by Professor Mor Barak; a Professor of Social Work and Business at the University of Southern California School of Social Work with a joint appointment at the Marshall School of Business. Professor Mor Barak’s insightful talk kicked off by explicitly presenting the challenges facing workplaces and societies in cultivating cultures of inclusion. Firstly, she highlighted the need of closing the gap between men’s and women’s unemployment rates and earnings. She followed then by emphasizing that despite demographic and economic benefits, resentment towards immigrants is heightened, which eventually sheds lights to a wider social illness; amplified prejudice and discrimination. Reviewing 296 articles in peer-reviewed journals that were published in the time between 1990-2013, it became obvious that several studies found that diversity made no difference or even had negative impact on measured outcomes. However, diversity management efforts that promote a climate of inclusion are consistently associated with positive outcomes (Mor Barak et al., 2016). In light of this, it is vital for the gap between diversity and inclusion policies and practices to be bridged if it is for the value of diversity to be effectively promulgated. She concluded with an inspirational quote “like colors, when people are forced to blend and give up their unique characteristics, the result

is a dull grey. Allowed to display their true colors, they shine brightly and together create an inspiring work of art”.

### **Cypriot perceptions regarding gender inequality**

The second keynote address, by Mrs. Anna Koukkides-Prokopiou who is the President of the International Association for the Promotion of Women in Europe (AIPFE) in Cyprus, reviewed the perceptions of Cypriots as regards gender inequality. She highlighted that there is a strong view that inequality must be tackled by the EU, with most prominent inequality being violence against women; an issue deeply inherent in patriarchal social stereotypes of power. Her research indicated that Cypriots believe that participation of women in the workplace can be enhanced primarily by promoting equal pay. The reality regarding gender inequality finds Cyprus to rank in the 100<sup>th</sup> place out of 145 worldwide in terms of gender equality, with women making an estimated 24,000\$ per year as opposed to 37,000\$ which is the corresponding average for men. Only 17% of senior officials, legislators and managers in Cyprus are women; only 4% of women ever rise to positions of leadership; and Cyprus ranks 41/145 in terms of female education, 88/145 in terms of female economic participation and only 124/145 in terms of political empowerment. Hence, she stressed that the particular gap between the desired and existing state apropos social inclusion in Cyprus needs to be filled with the correct approach and through the correct enactments of laws to ensure a fair and well-functioning anti-discrimination context. A number of seminars have already taken place to inform the public about issues regarding discrimination, and these efforts should continue until the desired result is achieved. A good furtherance of the campaign against discrimination will be the adoption of further measures and laws, as well as investment in educating the public on issues related to diversity and equality. This can be achieved by providing the public with more insight as to how some people are being treated upon by others, and simple methods that each individual can embed in daily life to eliminate discrimination.

### **Human Rights, Equality and Diversity in an ‘Era’ of Austerity – a Sub Saharan African Perspective**

Our third keynote speaker, Dr. Cynthia Forson an Associate Professor and Deputy Provost at Lancaster University Ghana, delivered a thought provoking presentation featuring the fundamental difference between the real face of Africa and the one presented in the western societies. Whereas our perception of Sub-Saharan Africa is of a cesspool of death, despair and depression, reality has it to be the host of intense and successful female entrepreneurial activity. Through the provision of a number of inspirational examples, Dr. Forson managed to convey a twofold message. Firstly, she underlined that even in an era of austerity, success stories do arise. Secondly, she reminded us that if we are to change social reality and restore social inclusion, we foremost need to change the eyes that see that reality.

### **Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Human Rights in Times of Austerity**

We begin the review of the selection of the conference papers with the contribution of Carliss Miller, Orlando Richard and İlhami Yücel, “When men are in the minority: the differential effects of leader-follower gender in pink collar settings”, which examines the gender differences among employees in gender-similar dyads with respect to affective attitudes toward the

organization. Using an integrative theoretical framework, the authors were interested in investigating whether those attitudes were moderated by their manager's gender status as well as their perception of the organization's discrimination practices against women. They argue that in environments that are low in discrimination against women, there would be established equitable standards for hiring and promotion and that women would maintain their high status in the organization, yet in a highly discriminatory environment that exhibits hiring, development and promotion preference towards men, they infer that men may be in positions of power and influence in the top management teams. These circumstances appear to generate a dynamic for a glass escalator effect for men where they have an advantaged status in a female-dominated organization (Williams, 1992), and a crabs in the barrel effect for women where they may prefer reporting to men. In this survey-based field study, the authors reported that in pink collar settings, women that are managed by women had more positive attitudes toward the organization than men managed by men, and this was more prominent when the discriminatory environment was fair for women. In short, and consistent with the Crabs in the Barrel Syndrome notion, when the organization has discriminatory practices that appear to disadvantage women, the organizational commitment is lower for women than men in gender-similar dyads.

Nicolina Kamenou-Aigbekaen's article "Women in Middle-Eastern organizations: career experiences, opportunities and work-life balance" sheds light in an under-researched area in the Middle-eastern region as there is a deficiency of research in this region looking at women's career progression, leadership, the glass-ceiling and work-life balance (with some notable exceptions, for example, Metcalfe et al. 2009; Metcalfe, 2010; Moghadam, 2013; Syed, 2010). Kamenou's research questions the narrow prominence of research focus on negotiating work and life, which typically only emphasizes childcare and time management (Kamenou, 2008) and seems to ignore wider thematic areas such as the effects of work on the family structure, family dynamics and cultural and religious factors. The contribution of this paper lies in examining these factors within the middle-eastern context which is of paramount importance with robust organizational and governmental implications for bridging the gap between family and work policies and practices.

The report then journeys into "Legitimizing the unacceptable and accepting the illegitimate: symbolic violence in the engineering profession in the UK", written and presented by Cynthia Forson, Moira Calveley and Paul Smith. The scope of this paper is to give voice to the experiences of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities in the UK engineering profession mainly by identifying the processes by which BME people are excluded and marginalized. Using Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, the authors aim to explore and understand the experiences of BME people in the engineering profession, both by shedding light in the process of gaining entry to the profession as well as their experiences of being part of the specific professional group. The data for this paper is drawn from a wider study which explored the issues and challenges faced by black and minority ethnic (BME) people and those from socio-economically disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds when choosing engineering as a profession in the UK. Placing their work in the a qualitative, inductive approach, they demonstrate how 'whiteness' and 'Britishness' can be perceived as synonymous with 'fitting in' and this is symbolized through individual identity. The results reveal that by accepting and changing parts of their identity research participants internalized and tacitly accepted the

symbolic violence being directed towards them and a “practice-acceptance-internalization-practice cycle” (Randle et al 2015) continues.

In the fourth paper, “Age Diversity Management: Its beauty is in the eye of the beholder!”, Erica French and Muhammad Ali, propose and test a positive relationship between three elements of age diversity management (diversity policies and systems, age diversity practices, and work-life programs) and one organizational outcomes namely, corporate social responsibility. Data were collected from 248 medium to large sized for profit organizations, private or publicly listed on the Australian Securities Exchange. The findings reveal that some aspects of age diversity management may be perceived by employees as transactional such as work-life programs with an age focus; while others, such as age diversity policies and systems may provide real opportunities for substantive transformational organizational learning. Finally, the results provide support for a strong strategic business case for managing age diversity through its various dimensions, including age diversity policy and systems; age diversity practices and work-life balance programs when considering the effects of the organizations own diversity perspective. This is aligned with the recommendations of Böhm et al. (2014) who advocated that organizations should not only establish age-inclusive practices but also actively speak about them so as to enhance employees’ awareness.

The fifth paper, “Being Coeliac: Hidden Inequalities in the Workplace”, by Valerie Caven, Sarah Pass and Stefanos Nachmias, explore the social, psychological and symbolic role of food for employees who suffer from coeliac disease. They argue that it can cause isolation and exclusion from organizational settings, and as a result, employees with coeliac disease may experience discriminatory practices which impact on their equal opportunities and dignity within the workplace. Their study attempts to assess the extent of the exclusion and discrimination experienced by sufferers from employers and/or colleagues or its impact upon wellbeing at work which at the moment is unknown as there is a dearth of knowledge about the management of coeliac disease in the workplace and whether employees have any rights or any legal responsibilities or moral obligations on the part of employers. This exploratory study seeks to address this gap by exploring and identifying the levels of awareness that exist among employers and human resource professionals; the extent of discrimination experienced by employees with coeliac disease and what, if any, areas of good practice exist which assist the management of the condition.

We finally present Dimitria Groutsis, Jock Collins and Carol Reid’s exploratory paper, “Enacting Solidarity: An Inclusive and Sustainable Solution for the Refugee Crisis”, which aims to open up a discussion on an experimental theoretical framework that draws on the insights of human geographers, governance literature and feminist scholars to propose a framework for the analysis of solidarity, access and equity and integration. In light of this, the authors draw on the case of the current refugee crisis mesmerizing the world. Through the lens of the current refugee crisis they argue that the various levels at which solidarity is played out and the multiple stakeholders involved in lobbying and advocating for refugees sees the process of the ‘solidarity project’ rendered meaningless. In the midst of this messy divisiveness lies the continued humanitarian crisis. They contribute to the relevant literature by proposing a model, to overcome the aforementioned gaps, which brings together the various levels of solidaristic engagement along with the various stakeholders involved. According to the authors, it is such a connectedness that

will overcome the exclusive and selective approach to solidarity that in practice makes a mockery of the notion of collective resistance. Based on such perspective, they seek to establish how solidarity is enacted in a more connected and meaningful way through their future research which endeavors to focus on the 12,000 Syrian refugees entering Australia.

## Conclusions

The report has provided an overview of the 2016 EDI conference by presenting various papers that have engaged with ongoing research in the field of equality, diversity, inclusion and social rights in an era of austerity. Findings from exploratory papers indicated the need to develop an understanding of the notion of solidarity and the divisive and inclusive elements of the enactment of solidarity. Empirical studies reveal that women and people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities continue to be excluded and marginalized, whereas there is a call for greater consideration of age in the social, economic, political and market arenas.

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