

Work in progress

First among

Isabel Fernandez-Mateo wants to know why there are so few women at the top

Your research has previously looked at temporary workers and manpower agencies. What are you working on now?

I'm looking at the kinds of barriers that prevent women advancing to top management positions. I've worked on the issues of gender inequality in the labour market for many years and particularly on the role of what we call labour market intermediaries. So I've looked at placement agencies, temporary help agencies and the different issues in matching people to jobs and whether they play any role in helping women into different jobs than men. It's a way of finding out whether employers play a role in gender inequality or diversity.

I then became more interested in the very top of the labour market and the role of executive search firms. When they talk about why there are so few women at the top, immediately the media discourse turns to search firms and the need to get them to provide female-only shortlists. They talk as if search firms are keeping women out of the best jobs.

How do you research this sort of thing? Data must be hard to come by.

We got data from one executive search firm. >

EQUALS



Nobody has got this kind of data before as they're understandably very secretive, but I have five years of data. For this project I am working with Roberto Fernandez, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and we are analysing how the search firm selects candidates for top management jobs.

And what did the data reveal?

We found that executive search firms are slightly less likely to interview women, but the bottom line is that when women have made it to C-suite level they are not less likely than men to get the jobs on offer. All the action happens way before. Trying to solve the problem by attacking it from the top is not very helpful; it should be done way earlier if you want to make a difference.

So the glass ceiling is much lower in organisations and, when it comes to senior executives being recruited by search firms, there's no evidence from your research there is discrimination against women.

Very little. It was not what I was expecting.

What were you expecting?

The idea of the glass ceiling is that the barriers become higher the higher you go up the organisation. This means that women cannot get beyond a certain level and are going to experience even more barriers at the top than they would below. Our research suggests that this is something of a simplification and, at least with the data we have, it doesn't look as if headhunters contribute to the problem. To emphasise, we're looking at C-level and board level appointments, the very top jobs. The percentage of women in this market is around ten per cent on average but with CEOs it is only five per cent.

So your research finds that women are basically given a fair deal at that level when they're recruited?

Yes. But the fact is that there are not many women at that level anyway.

Where does your research go next?

We have also found that when headhunters hire – rather than firms hiring directly – it doubles the number of women hired. The

search firm placed 12 per cent of women in jobs. The companies themselves placed six per cent and that was when they were hiring externally, but if they were promoting they were actually promoting even fewer women.

So it's companies rather than search firms who reinforce the glass ceiling.

These are very preliminary findings, but they do suggest that we really need to take a look at how companies promote people, and women in particular. We, of course, need to look at how general these results are, but it looks as though women are hired externally but then don't seem to be being promoted at the same rates. Much of the discussion in the last few years has focused on hiring women – making sure that search firms provide female-only shortlists and so on. But what about if women aren't then promoted once hired? There seems to be something of a fork in the road in terms of women's careers. I now want to go into companies to investigate further.

“Our data revealed that executive search firms are slightly less likely to interview women”

What would you like to see change to ensure that women are more fairly represented in the senior echelons of organisations?

I would like to see more transparency in promotion processes. There is a lot going on in firms that we just don't know much about so I would like to know more about how jobs are filled, why women are dropping out, if they are. I think the trouble is we don't have good evidence to know exactly what the problem is so I find it very difficult to come up with a solution beyond wanting to know what's really going on.

Isn't the central problem that it's self-perpetuating, in that men hold the majority of senior positions and people always recruit people in their own image, one way or another?

On the other side we also know that women are also biased! I do think there's a lot of experimental and qualitative evidence of this. But until you have more systematic evidence of how the number of women at the top affects the number of women in levels below the answer is unclear. People talk about increasing

the number of women on boards believing that it trickles down to the number of women in the rest of the organisation. They tend not to have strong evidence that that's the case.

What's the role of academic research in changing things?

I have a very modest role and goal. We need to know what the problem is so we can take action. We need to know where to look. And unless we know where to look, where in the process the bias happens, we're just guessing.

The job of academic research is to provide the evidence. When you actually look at the whole process of recruiting and also promoting women there is already consistent evidence that most bias happens at the very beginning of the process rather than at the end.

As you say, if you never get that transparency about how people are hired and promoted, your chances of finding out or getting to the source of the problem are restricted.

Yes, we need transparency and all the data to figure out where the problem is. Otherwise we're just working on assumptions and stories.

Are you optimistic that things are changing for the better?

A little, but it's going to take a long time and incentives need to be in place to really change things.

But there has been plenty of research showing that the more diversity there is in management, the more it actually benefits the bottom line.

There's not that much actually – a couple of papers, perhaps. I understand why people use that argument, but most often it's not causal. It's not because you have more women on the board you do better, it's that the companies who do better also have more women on the board. There is some evidence but it's not very strong evidence yet.

And at the end of the day I don't care whether diversity is good for business or not. Why do you have to justify it by saying that diversity is good for the bottom line? You don't have to use that argument for men. I don't hear anyone saying let's hire more men because they're good for the bottom line. You should give people the same opportunities when they're equally qualified to do the job. ■

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