

## Feminization is not good for PR: here's why.

By Ana Adi

When I spoke a couple of weeks ago about the feminization of public relations at the Kommunikations Kongress Academy, a series of online lectures given to Kommunikations Kongress 2020 participants, some members of the audience reacted strongly indicating that to them “feminization” sounded like a swear word.

While that was certainly not my intention, the feminization of any profession, that is its uptake and carrying out by a bigger percentage of women than men, has serious and long-term implications on those professions, their pay, their societal perceived worth, their career progression path, the economy, the communities they serve and thus on each individual either in the profession or considering to either join it or leave it.

In most countries around the world, the public relations workforce is currently reported to be mainly comprised of women: Romania and Finland are perhaps leading the charts with about 90% female representation while the US and UK the percentage is about 60%.

But there is a wrong conclusion that can be reached from these statistics, and that is that since there are more women in public relations, that means that public relations is a “woman’s job”, like say teaching, midwifery or caretaking. Another incorrect conclusion is the one following the path of “women are natural born communicators”, hence public relations is a job that would fit them better.

Jennifer Bosson’s research on the psychology of gender suggests that professions that are perceived as being overly feminine are avoided by men. Statistics in the US in particular indicate that men would rather be unemployed than be hired or get reskilled in a profession that is perceived as being for women. This also means that job attractiveness for entrants in the field is reduced, an explanation perhaps for the reduced number of males pursuing communication and public relations related degrees.

Moreover, public relations as a profession is all but a gender neutral trade. In her chapter published in this year’s Women in PR book that Edna Ayme-Yahil and I edited, Liz Yeomans citing Jaqui L’Etang shows how divided across gender lines PR used to be in the 1960s and 1970s with women being assigned beauty and fashion accounts; men were assigned to more serious matters and businesses. Additionally, current and perpetuating associations of PR practitioners with bunnies in the UK, mice in Germany and girls in Romania, do all but diminish the value, complexity and competence that the profession requires and this in turn, in association with PR being a “women’s job” lead to it being perceived as less important. These negative, stereotypical associations are also seen in how PR practitioners have been portrayed in pop culture, and in particular in movies and TV series. Kinsky’s review of the TV series “The West Wing”, for instance, points out that females PR practitioners in the series are “more likely to answer media questions, to deal with media outside interviews, to lead a news conference (...) and they were shown as silly more often”.

Needless to say, such gendered views of the profession aren't helpful yet they might explain the higher percentages of women working in public relations and they might also explain the pay gap.

According to Data USA, the average annual salary of a male working in PR is around 104,000 USD while that of a females averages just about under 70.000 USD; a whopping 30% difference! In the UK, according to 2017 data the difference was around 20% (from roughly 58.000 GBP average salaries for men versus 45.000 GBP for women). In comparison, in Germany gender accounts for a 6% difference in annual salary according to Salaryexplorer.com (about 48.000eur for men vs 44.000eur) while in Romania this difference is almost inexistent (here there might be two factors at play: the country's communist past when women were more than encouraged to join the workforce and the proliferation and increased popularity of communication services only after the 1990s).

The reasons for the pay gap between male and female public relations practitioners is a complex story. It goes beyond gender societal constructs, and perceived worth of any person's work and into the different career paths and systems of support (or lack thereof) available for female and male practitioners.

In her article for the Women in PR book, Talia Beckett-Davis brings attention to the non-linearity of women's careers in PR, which are often interrupted by motherhood and caring duties for other family members. This hinders their progression and promotion and can push them into undertaking either part-time positions (thus making the glass ceiling impenetrable; few top management positions are offered to part-time staff because of a lingering assumption that the meaningful and successful employment is full time and thus that it is people who worked full time that are either deserving or have the experience to successfully fill these positions and their requirements) or opting for different jobs and positions upon their re-entry to the workforce. Similar insights come from Argentina as well (see Carolina A Carbone and Luz Canella Tsuji's chapter in Women in PR) and reflect all too well Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women* argument according to which gender socialization, lack of systems designed to support women and lack of data specifically focused on women and their needs perpetuates inequality (flexible and part-time work, beyond promotion, contributes also to the more precarious state of women after retirement as well).

Speaking of inequality, this brings into focus two other phenomena affecting PR practice: management representation and diversity.

In an article published in the Atlantic back in 2014, Olga Khazan quoting Sarahjane Sacchetti, handling marketing for Secret, remarked this imbalance, especially in the agency world.

"It's all women out there (...) and the two people running it are dudes."

Whether owning an agency or holding a management position, gender continues to play a role. In another interesting review on the psychology of gender, Olga Khazan also points out that female employees still tend to prefer male bosses. So if the path to breaking the glass ceiling was narrow already, this makes it even narrower. This in turn brings a slew of effects including women not being supportive of fellow women especially when they perceive that

the competition is tough. This phenomenon is confirmed by several authors in our Women in PR book: this is what Liz Yeomans calls a lack of feminist consciousness among senior female practitioners, what Amelia Reigstad identifies as sexism in PR and what Carolina A Carbone and Luz Canella Tsuji picked up from their interviews with senior women in PR in Argentina, where the interviewees can identify a variety of obstacles or the advancement of women however dismiss to recognize these structural barriers as applying to themselves. This is also confirmed by CIPR's report "PR and Pay Equality: a qualitative study into the challenges and perspective on gender pay" where "senior alpha females attitudes on flexible working", fear and stigma, lack of transparency and agency culture and structure, and business and sector bias are also listed as contributing to these inequalities.

The way out of this is rather clear: recognize bias and address it.

Caroline Criado Perez's solution is the introduction of gender quotas, her evidence pointing to the fact that "quotas don't lead to the monstrous regiment of incompetent women. [...]" but rather "increase the competence of the political class in general". This being the case, gender quotas are nothing more than a corrective to a hidden male bias". Moreover, the existence of more women reduces the perception of competition among fellow women and increases support and collaboration.

Germany, for instance, introduced a gender quota law in 2016 mandating that at least 30% of boardroom positions had to be filled by women in all publicly listed companies and those with workers' participation in corporate governance. This is slightly different than (senior) management positions and also different as a context from public relations firms and departments but it is nonetheless related to breaking the glass ceiling. The law effects, despite reluctance that women would be hard to find and then even harder to replace had they left their position, has led to a 6% increase of women in German board rooms over a three year period (2015- 2019, from 25% to 31%). It is thus of no surprise that this has been followed by calls to do the same with senior management. This, however, has been proven to be a much slower to change. In 2019 "among Germany's top 200 companies, measured by annual revenue, just 8% of senior managers are women" says Heike Anger in her *Gender quotas make an impact in the boardroom* article for the Handelsblatt.

The introduction of gender quotas for senior management and board rooms might solve PR's imbalance at the top (and with it potentially break the glass ceiling and help reduce the gender pay gap – reverse gender quotas might also be a solution for organizations and countries where the PR workforce is almost entirely made out of women), but it will not shake off the way feminization affects the way the profession is perceived. For that perhaps, public relations as a workforce needs to strive for even more diversity and inclusion amongst its own ranks. This can be achieved by dispelling myths about the profession, showing its societal impact including ethics, breaking stereotypes, and aiming to gain visibility among younger generations as a desirable and viable career option but also by considering research, networking and maybe even quotas. Additionally, to ensure PR is in itself a diverse and inclusive workforce, as research, measurement and evaluation and digital literacy skills )as a means of detecting bias in processes and data) are vital as they provide practitioners

with the insight, understanding and tools to help, advise, and support organizations, institutions and communities alike in their efforts to understand each other.

Finally, beyond addressing issues internally, within the profession, what is also needed to address feminization, close the pay gap and break the glass ceiling is to have the recognition that the profession matters. The COVID-19 pandemic has proven the need for communication services and their relevance for organizations of any kind. They have also proven their positive impact when stakeholders are considered. Perhaps as everyone joins an organization and gets onboarded, communication should become a compulsory part of the process. Realizing how important communication is can only help dispelling the myths that communication is easy or that it is something that just women do naturally well.