

Activists and Advancing Inclusive Business Cultures: Women Working for Change

September 6, 2021

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This blog post is based on the intervention of Erika George in the webinar on Corporate Due Diligence and Gender Equality organised by the Nova Centre on Business, Human Rights and the Environment with the support of the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union in partnership with the British Institute of International and Comparative Law, the Portuguese Ombudsman (Provedor de Justiça), the Teaching Business and Human Rights Forum, and NOVA 4 The Globe on the 24th of June 2021.

"We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it's never a question of 'critical mass.' It's always about critical connections."—Grace Lee Boggs

Question: What is the role of gender activism and in which ways can activists help improve business culture in relation to diversity and gender equality?

I've been thinking about the too often overlooked women's rights activists and women's labor rights activists, who preceded our conversations about business and human rights. The women workers who paved the way for the women to be in the c-suites by making way

for women in the workforce. Increasing the number of women in leadership and executive roles recently has been at the center of current conversation on diversity and inclusion and these are the women we focused on when we think about gender equity and equality in business.

So, I wanted to take us back to look at early organizing and earlier activism by women. I am speaking from the context of the United States, where clearly intersectionality (race and gender identity) had a significant influence on who was doing what labor and who was organizing. If we look at who the women are, who are doing the kinds of work that place a woman at risk: women in factories, women on farms; we can learn a great deal about the role of women in bringing about the conditions necessary to improve business culture with respect to gender equity. Initially, I will start with a woman who was very active in creating labor policy for the United States. I will conclude with women labor activists and organizers who demanded stronger protections and more inclusive policies.

Frances Perkins, was the Department of Labor Secretary for Franklin Delano Roosevelt – FDR, who was President of the United States during World War II. His wife Eleanor Roosevelt was instrumental in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Frances Perkins was influenced by the industrial disaster of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, where women textile workers were burned alive because management locked them into the factory during the work day. The tragedy was demonstrated the need for a major labor rights reform because profits were made from exploiting unprotected women workers. There are groups of women who still continued to be unprotected – these are largely migrant women and Black women trapped into doing low wage service labor and care work. Black women descended from formerly enslaved people in the US continue to experience the adverse impacts of being undervalued and vulnerable. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that despite the essential work women of color do they can be treated as expendable.

Dolores Huerta helped to organize farmworkers in California in forming one of the largest agricultural labor unions. She started as a teacher who was observing what was happening to the children of farmworkers. She also saw what was happening to women in the field in terms of sexual harassment, sexual violence. So, her position as a migrant woman and a woman of color in the role of being in proximity to people working on factory farms gave her a perspective that a top-down due diligence lens might not have. So, to points made previously by my colleagues Nadia Bernaz and Penelope Simons that nothing is entirely gender neutral (or for that matter race neutral), including the global policies and business practices. If we start from the perspective of women workers, I think we would look very differently at business and workplace cultures.

A woman who is perhaps little known but did a tremendous amount of work that is worthy of reference as we think about how activists are advancing ethical business cultures is Velma Hopkins. She was an organizer in North Carolina employed by the RJ Reynolds Tobacco Factory. So, her activism engaged with both women on farms and women in factories. As a Black woman she was excluded from unions that were racially segregated at the time, still she did a tremendous amount of work to stage walkouts and strikes, leading over 10,000 people out on a strike and ultimately establishing the right to organize labor.

Both of Huerta and Hopkins were also active in voting rights movements in the United States. I imagine this is because they both appreciated that understanding and participating in governance, whether it's participating as a labor organizer to influence the practices of a private firm or political organizing to ensure representation in the government that is going to regulate the firms is critically important.

Grace Lee Boggs, an Asian American woman became active in labor organizing when she married a Detroit factory worker in the auto mobile sector. They founded Detroit Summer, after noticing that the people of Detroit didn't have the same resources as people elsewhere. Acknowledging the intersectionalities of different isms – racism, sexism as well as persistent problems of inequality and poverty – through activism and organizing to demand better wages and create space for people to have these conversations.

By way of contrast and comparison, I also note Sheryl Sandberg because of her work to increase women's representation and to elevate women in the digital economy. Reasonable people can disagree about whether it is "leaning in" that is necessary to advance equitable and inclusive business cultures; or whether or not the burden should be on women to insert themselves into male dominated workplaces more aggressively. Shoshana Zuboff, a scholar whose work I very much admire, has called Sheryl Sandberg the "Typhoid Mary of surveillance capitalism." But, putting that critique aside, the lack of women in technology is likely leading to problems and human rights risks we aren't detecting. Consider the types of issues that Dolores Huerta saw because of her proximity to farmworkers in the fields. If we don't have women in these leading global companies, at multiple levels in within these companies, working on a status equal with men, whatever that level may be, I believe we will be missing out on opportunities to make progress. The diligence that needs to be done becomes more difficult when we don't have the voices of rights activists. I believe we need to look at why these spaces are difficult for women to enter and to remain. Throughout the commercial value chain, whether at the top of the corporate structure or at the very bottom, inequality exists and persists for women.

There are a growing number of women activists and academic researchers working to reform in the in the tech sector. Rebecca MacKinnon has done some really interesting work designing indicators and ranking for digital rights to protect privacy and expression. What if we were to have more indicators devoted to detecting gender inequality? I think that could be fundamentally feminist and very constructive for efforts to create more inclusive business cultures.

So, it is important to acknowledge the women's rights and labor rights activists that preceded us and have helped progress our field by setting precedent to expect respect for women workers. They are paving the way for women up the corporate ladder, and ultimately what they all have in common, whether they're in agriculture or industrial labor, is the courage to demand respect for their rights and to demand access to remedy for labor rights violations when they have been wronged. So, this is a long conversation. We are on a continuum, and I do think we're moving forward, but businesses can and must do more.

Question: How can we identify the indicators that give relevant information about gender equality, because we heard that it's very important to have concrete measures, you know, it inside concrete measures in these naps of course to be monitored but how can we identify the indicators?

As countries are constructing their National Action Plans (NAPs) to ensure businesses respect human rights, I think it's important to determine what kind of information will be collected and how that information will be used to advance gender equality. I'm very encouraged about the World Benchmarking Alliance's new 2021 gender equality and empowerment benchmark.

Having some sort of standard against which businesses will be measured will give competitors in different industry sectors something to strive—leadership on an issue of increasing importance in the culture generally, equity. Having information and benchmarks will give shareholders and stakeholders grounds to call for more concrete and meaningful measures to promote gender equality. There has been more activity on the part of shareholders to assess the social and environmental impacts of particular business enterprises. Asset managers and investors are asking different questions of business. There is more interested in investing in human rights or "investing in the rights way." More and more retail investors and consumers, in the United States and perhaps even more so in Europe are concerned about the conditions under which products are produced.

The World Business Alliance Benchmark is taking a holistic approach to assessing gender equality and empowerment. While the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the Millennium Development Goals before them were purely or primarily quantitative, the

Benchmark seeks to measure a mix of data. Whenever we are talking about the kind of relevant information, we need with respect to gender equality and gender empowerment evaluations we also need a qualitative understanding of what the challenges are women are facing in accessing and enjoying opportunity. So, it's not enough to say that X number of women are CEOs or Y number of women occupy leadership roles, rather it is also important to seek insight into cultures and conditions that create or remove barriers for women's full participation.

The Benchmark intends to bringing relevant data points together in a manner that is integrated, holistic and also balanced. It is integrated in the sense that it seeks to identify gaps, by looking to those who have the information—women workers. It is also intended to be flexible and industry specific. The scope of the methodology looks to understanding different stakeholder groups in the workplace the marketplace, in the supply chain and in the community. It will look to hard numbers for compensation and promotion and recruitment, but it also looks to things like agency and influence in the workplace. In my view this is the right direction to be looking. Do women have agency when they are in their workplaces and workspaces. A holistic understanding will be important as we see to crafting was to measure concrete progress to assess NAP performance.

Question: How is it possible to overcome networking bias, and to include more women so again, on the company side?

Networks must be reworked to work for more women. The incentive structures have to be aligned in such a way that those who would be inclined but not make the time or have the time for it can make it a priority to include women. Given the neoliberal business culture that we have presently, if there are ways to reward people, either in currency or some other kind of currency for cooperation I think that perhaps we will start to see a shift.

The other thing is that often women do a really good job lifting up other women. As a practical matter, for women who want to network finding the communities within your area of practice or your field of research and networking among women actually gets more women further. Networking across difference may require getting people to overcome bias. First, this means you have to identify the bias. Many people have unconscious bias or even conscious biases that they're not willing to admit to.

Managing difference in the workplace will mean creating a culture of psychological safety where people can admit what it is they don't know and then be encouraged to get to know more—about women and gender equity and gender empowerment. Greater knowledge can lead to a greater appreciation of the value of including women in work networks.

Suggested citation: E. George, 'Activists and Advancing Inclusive Business Cultures: Women Working for Change', Nova Centre on Business, Human Rights and the Environment Blog, 6th September 2021.