

Women-Friendly Certification: Can It truly Improvement Women's Workplace Conditions?

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Abstract. Gender equality at work has increasingly attracted significant attention, being extensively examined in both academic discourse and workplace practice. It is also a key element for a sustainable enterprise and an important social development indicator. In this case women-friendly certification is an outside review system that is coming to try to help the company recruit and promote, equal pay, benefits and changes to the workplace environment. This paper wants to know if this certification is going to change what women do and if it's going to have an impact. Just a showpiece label? Certification is a double edge sword, having both advantages and disadvantage as well. It triggers some changes in institutions; it makes woman who works and likes company have a good reputation. but there are also a lot of problems, such as being unfair, not transparent, and just for a short while. This paper states that women-friendly certificates are a push for promotion but probably not as much as you would think. it's a long way from gender equality in a sector, and it would need far more stringent governance than people could ever enforce with our system. more data information, which is more than the quantity of the data provided in the report, even more cultural changes than what people have now.

Keywords: workplace gender equality, gender discrimination, organisational change.

1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen more consideration of gender equality as a matter of great importance both in world as well as intellectual communities. Based on the results of the research data, people all know that women still have enormous disadvantages at home. At the same time, the described technology had its own hidden biases; therefore, women's own development on their own careers was even more limited.

To address these challenges, women-friendly certification has been introduced in various countries and regions. It aims to encourage companies to improve recruitment, promotion, compensation, and welfare systems through external evaluation and third-party oversight, thereby creation a fairer work environment for women. However, this certification has sparked considerable debate in practice. On the one hand, it has led to reforms in areas such as parental leave, childcare leave, and flexible working arrangements. On the other hand, critics argue that the standards are inconsistent, the process lacks transparency, and companies often use certification as a marking tool, resulting in mere compliance with formalities rather than substantive improvements. This paper use

literature review and case studies to analyze the effectiveness and limitations of women-friendly certification across different contexts, to evaluate whether it truly improves women's workplace conditions or remains symbolic.

There are three goals for this paper. The first is to examine the role of women-friendly certification in driving corporate reform and improving women's workplace experiences; The second is to reveal its shortcomings and risks, including fragmented standards, low transparency, and limited long-term effects; The last one is to propose policy and institutional improvements such as unified standards, transparent data disclosure, and long-term monitoring. In summary, this paper argues that although women-friendly certification alone cannot eliminate structural inequalities, it can serve as an important institutional tool and a starting point for promoting gender equality.

2. Manuscript preparation

Gender equality is not only a core issue for the sustainable development of modern enterprises but also one of the key goals of global policies. The need for gender equality certification arises because some corporate cultures often conceal deeper forms of inequality. Although many countries have legally prohibited all forms of gender discrimination, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and multiple International Labour Organization (ILO) treaties, in practice, formal equality does not necessarily represent substantial equality. There is still a significant difference between the two.

In academia, many researchers describe this difference as the opposition between "formal equality" and "substantial equality". Formal equality emphasizes equal treatment in rules, while substantial equality requires achieving true fairness in opportunities and outcomes.

For example, in some recruitment processes, female applicants are often asked irrelevant questions about their marital status or whether they plan to have children, even though these topics have no connection to job abilities or practical experience. Some unmarried women are even asked to guarantee that they will not marry or have children in the coming years. This type of social stereotype causes companies to worry that these female employees may spend excessive time and energy on household responsibilities, neglecting work. The existence of this stereotype can also be seen in salary disparities. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office report, in 2021, women held 42% of management positions in the United States, yet the median salaries of full-time female managers were only about 71% of those of their male counterparts [1].

Furthermore, gender discrimination also hinders women in their promotion process. A McKinsey report revealed that in the technology sector, the percentage of women in first-line management positions is only 26% [1]. This phenomenon is referred to as the "broken ladder". Other data shows that in 2022, for every 100 men promoted to managerial roles in U.S. companies, only 87 women received the same opportunity. This early promotion gap continues to widen throughout their career, further impacting women's individual career goals and the overall positive development of the workplace.

In addition to these visible biases that can be reflected in specific data, some invisible biases are still shaping the women's workplace environments. Psychological studies of "unconscious bias" and the "glass ceiling" concept highlight this obstacle [2]. For example, in some technical industries, women are often considered unsuitable for highly rational jobs, this leads to even more severe bias and discrimination against women in such industries. Data from OECD in 2021 shows that female employees hold less than 30% of senior management positions worldwide. Even in some Nordic countries which are considered as leaders in gender equality, women in traditionally "male-dominated" sectors such as finance and technology still advance more slowly than men. This

invisible culture of discrimination needs female employees in technical industries to work harder to secure relatively equal treatment and rights. Research has further shown that such institutional and procedural barriers are widespread and common across various types of workplace environments.

One point that is easily missed is that in some female-dominated industries like nursing, gender discrimination also exists. Kouta and Kaite found that, although women take up the high proportion of nursing, men are still have advantages in promotion. This phenomenon is often called as the "glass escalator", it highlights that gender discrimination will still hinder the development of women even in the industries which are almost make up by the female. It suggests that women-friendly certification must consider the specific situation as well, and it can not assume that female-majority industries must be fair [3].

3. The role of women-friendly certification

3.1. Positive impact of female-friendly certification

Female-friendly certification has a positive impact on companies, employees, and society, promoting the institutionalization and socialization of gender equality.

At the corporate level, female-friendly certification often requires certified companies to self-assess and improve systems related to recruitment, pay, promotion, and welfare. This external pressure can encourage management of companies and policymakers to pay more attention on the rights and equality of women, promoting improvements in specific systems. For example, some companies choose more transparent promoting standards after certification, reducing managerial bias and focusing promoting criteria on work abilities and practical experience, thus increasing opportunities for women and promoting healthy workplace competition. Female-friendly can also effectively push companies to improve parental leave policies and flexible work systems, providing more support for maternity and parental leave, helping women balance work and family better, and reducing psychological pressure. Studies show that companies that have been certificated often include gender diversity as a key strategic goal. For instance, after receiving female-friendly certification, Google not only show their salary information to the public but also included the proportion of female employees as one of the key performance indicators.

At the employee level, this certification has a significant impact on employees' psychological perceptions and behaviors. A Deloitte survey of over 5,000 women in 10 countries found that those working in companies with greater gender equality felt more loyal, productive, and connected to their workplace. These scores were significantly higher than those working in companies with lower gender equality scores [4].

Moreover, the psychological impact of gender discrimination cannot be ignored. A study found that, women who experienced the discrimination such as unequal pay, were more likely to have the depressive symptoms. This can show that, if the gender discrimination cannot be solved in different level, it will not only hinder the career development of the female but also damage the mental health. From this sight, the significance of certification can be proved [5].

3.2. Limitations of female-friendly certification

However, this certification inevitably has its limitations.

One serious problem is the lack of unified certification standards. Different institutions and countries have significant differences in their certification criteria. For example, EDGE, and internationally influential certification organization, places more emphasis on pay fairness,

recruitment and promoting opportunities, flexible work systems, and leadership development, while some local certification agencies focus more on external cultural promotion and specific female protection measures [6]. These differences in evaluation criteria make it difficult to compare certification results across companies or countries, thus weakening in the credibility of the certification.

Another issue is that certification can become a tool for "symbolic compliance". According to institutional theory, companies often adopt a series of formal measure that meet societal expectations to obtain labels or certifications, but these measures may not lead to substantial improvements. A prominent case is the Wal-Mart v. Dukes lawsuit, one of the largest class action suits in U.S. history, the plaintiffs, consisting of Walmart employees and some former employees, accused Walmart of discriminating against women in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They claimed that local managers exercised discretionary authority over pay and promotions in ways that disproportionately favored male employees, and that Walmart's refusal to restrict such managerial power resulted in unlawful disparate impact and disparate impact and disparate treatment against women. They sought injunctive and declaratory relief, punitive damages, and back pay from the court. Although Walmart has publicly emphasized its equal opportunity policies and participated in various diversity certification programs, female employees continued to face unequal treatment [7]. This suggests that such certifications are often superficial rather than substantive. In fact, some companies, after obtaining certification, may polish their public image of gender equality and non-discrimination, but internal issues such as pay gaps, promotion barriers, and entrenched cultural inequalities remain largely unaddressed.

Furthermore, when assessing corporate applications for certification, data-based research is often required, yet such authentic and reliable data can be difficult to obtain. Many certification bodies rely primarily on self-reported company data rather than independent audits or anonymous employee surveys. This approach creates room for companies to embellish or misrepresent reality. For instance, some multinational corporate selectively disclose only overall gender ratios while withholding critical indicators such as gender pay gaps, promotion rates of male versus female managers, employee satisfaction across genders, or perceived equality in the workplace. Such practices often distort the evaluation process and undermine the accuracy of certification outcomes.

Finally, the long-term effects of female-friendly certification have not been fully verified. Daemen and van der Krogt proposed that while companies may initially adjust their policies, they lack sustained motivation to continue after certification, leading to a "short-period compliance, Long-period stagnation" phenomenon that weakens the impact of certification on promoting substantial equality [8].

3.3. Compare benefits and limitations

Based on the above research, it is clear that women-friendly certification demonstrates significant advantages in practice, but it also reveals certain shortcomings.

On the positive side, certification requires companies to conduct self-assessments in areas such as recruitment, pay, promotion, and benefits. This helps reduce managerial bias, improves the effectiveness of institutional reforms, and makes policy improvements more efficient. Certification can also enhance employees' sense of belonging, thereby increasing their loyalty and productivity. In addition, it strengthens a company's public image and sense of social responsibility. Companies that obtain women-friendly certification often establish a positive reputation in public opinion, which helps attract more talent and indirectly drives improvements among uncertified companies in the same industry.

But on the other hand, it's also a problem as there are no set measures with which to evaluate. Different certification bodies using different indicators make it impossible to compare companies and countries and reduces the credibility of women-friendly certification. Second some businesses regard it as yet another visual endeavor resulting in this sort of compliance without any real alteration structural inequalities within the firm will not just vanish due to a lack of data transparency. Certification bodies depend on companies to self-report info, this alters the ultimate evaluation and excludes details like the gender pay gap, promotion rates, and gender equality in the workplace. And here's another thing, the certification is only short term. From studies, according to studies, although some companies make some policy changes during the first period of certification, because there is no constant supervision and implementation, it is therefore difficult to build up momentum of.

Overall, women-friendly certification plays a significant role in promoting institutional reform, improving female employees' job satisfaction, and fostering a positive corporate image. At the same time, it suffers from weaknesses in standards, implementation, oversight, and sustainability. In other words, certification is a valuable tool, but it is not a "final solution" to eliminating gender inequality. Only when combined with stricter institutional design, greater transparency in data disclosure, and deep cultural transformation within companies can it truly fulfill its intended role.

4. Optimizing and developing the certification mechanism

4.1. Policy optimizing paths

Women-friendly certification has already played a role in promoting gender equality. However, to further eliminate differential treatment and reduce social inequality, companies need to make deeper adjustments in their internal policies and organizational culture. First, people should consider how to move this form of certification from superficial compliance toward substantive equality. Many companies merely meet a series of formal evaluation criteria during the certification process yet fail to implement them in their everyday practices. Enterprises that have already obtained certification should regard it as a starting point for improvement rather than an endpoint. Those that have not yet been certified should use the evaluation criteria as benchmarks and take certified enterprises as models, further refining their own systems. Only by implementing non-discriminatory treatment in practice and making these substantive actions a prerequisite for obtaining certification can companies earn the women-friendly certification with genuine legitimacy. Second, certification bodies and relevant government departments should actively promote more detailed public disclosure of corporate data, such as gender pay levels, promotion rates by gender, gender composition in senior management, and patterns of job mobility. This move would make corporate equality policies more transparent and easier for the public to monitor. Such transparency not only facilitates the work of certification bodies and government departments but also enhances the credibility of certification and encourages companies to pursue continuous improvement. Since 2017, the law in the United Kingdom has required companies with more than 250 employees to publicly disclose data related to their gender pay gaps [9]. This measure has, to some extent, enhanced the effectiveness of external oversight and promoted the development of gender equality in the workplace. Third, companies should strive to transform their underlying culture by reducing hidden gender stereotypes through training, awareness campaigns, and leadership role modeling [10]. Research by McKinsey shows that companies whose senior executives actively promote a culture of diversity have, on average, about 11% more women in executive positions compared to those lacking cultural development efforts. Therefore, cultural transformation not only helps

advocate the correct principles of equality but also serves as a key driving force for the long-term development of enterprises.

Women's career development is impacted by the unequal distribution of tasks between the sexes known as the "invisible chain". Its root lies in deeply embedded social stereotypes in the old idea that "managing the home, raising kids, taking care of the elderly" are women's main duties, which seeps into every nook and cranny of a household and serves as visible constraints on women's working place. When women reach the career advancement stage, they are constrained even more as women by family responsibilities. The question becomes pressing, however, when women find themselves at the critical moments on the career ladder and simultaneously at the pinnacle of domestic tasks, so it's impossible to choose between the two. It's not for lack of ability, but it's because society imposes one-sided family responsibilities on women. It is assumed, regardless of how well women are doing at work, if they have children, then the family still has much more of a responsibility on women, it's kind of a tricky situation [11].

To break this impasse, government-level institutional design is crucial. First, the legalization of "shared family responsibilities" should be promoted and incorporated into social security and labor rights systems. For example, Sweden's "shared parental leave" system can serve as a reference: couples are entitled to a total of no less than 18 months of paid parental leave, of which at least six months must be taken exclusively by the father, otherwise the leave is forfeited. This "mandatory sharing" mechanism can fundamentally change the perception that child-rearing is solely a woman's responsibility and encourage men to actively participate in family affairs. Second, complementary support measures should be improved to reduce the burden of family care. On one hand, investment in inclusive childcare facilities should be increased; on the other hand, a "home-based eldercare subsidy" system can be established to provide in-home care, day-care services, and other support for families with eldercare needs, thereby reducing the time women spend on elderly care.

The publicity departments should take on the responsibility of "cultural reshaping" by promoting the concept of shared family responsibilities through multiple channels and formats, thereby breaking gender stereotypes and conveying its modern value [9]. In terms of content, it is important to avoid portraying "men doing housework or taking care of children" as exceptional or exemplary behavior. Instead, using real family cases and everyday scenarios can demonstrate shared family responsibilities as a normal part of life, helping to establish it as a social consensus.

In addition, companies should also act as practitioners of "shared family responsibilities." On one hand, they can implement flexible work arrangements, allowing employees to adjust their working hours according to family needs. On the other hand, companies can establish family emergency leave policies that clearly stipulate that taking leave due to unexpected family situations will not affect performance evaluations, enabling employees to focus more on caring for their families.

4.2. Future development directions

International organizations can explore establishing a unified global certification framework like ISO, creating universally applicable gender equality standards. With the development of digital technologies, big data, and AI, dynamic monitoring of companies' salary structures, promotion paths, and employee satisfaction could reduce reliance on self-reported data, ensuring more accurate evaluation results.

5. Conclusion

This paper aims to explore the role and limitations of women-friendly certification in promoting gender equality in the workplace. The study finds that as an institutional tool, women-friendly certification can, to a certain extent, encourage companies to adjust their policies regarding recruitment, pay, promotions, and employee benefits, thereby improving female employees' job satisfaction and sense of belonging. It can also enhance a company's public image and reputation, reflecting its attention to and commitment to gender equality. By establishing clear evaluation criteria, the certification mechanism provides companies with concrete goals and reference frameworks for policy formulation and implementation, thereby helping to reduce certain subjective biases among management regarding gender issues.

However, research also highlights significant limitations of women-friendly certification in practice. First, different certification bodies have varying definitions of what constitutes "women-friendly," and there is a lack of unified international or industry standards, which can lead to differences in the effectiveness of certification implementation. Second, the transparency of the certification process and its supervisory mechanisms need improvement. Some companies may only make short-term adjustments during the initial stages of certification. This phenomenon undermines the role of certification in achieving substantive equality. In addition, current women-friendly certifications mainly focus on improvements at the policy and institutional levels, while their influence on deeper factors such as corporate culture, employee behavior, and implicit biases remains limited. This means that even if a company meets the certification criteria, female employees may still face barriers to promotion or unequal treatment within the organization.

In summary, women-friendly certification cannot serve as a definitive solution to workplace gender inequality, but its value as an institutional tool should not be overlooked. The certification provides companies with clear directions for reform and measurable standards, offers policymakers practical references, and gives the public a basis for evaluating a company's gender equality status. More importantly, the certification mechanism can, to some extent, guide companies from passively complying with laws and regulations to actively creating a more inclusive work environment, thereby gradually promoting gender equality in the workplace.

Future research should further focus on the long-term effects of certification, particularly whether companies are able to sustain policy improvements and cultural development after obtaining certification. In addition, relevant international authorities could consider establishing unified international or industry standards to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the certification. With the rapid development of big data and artificial intelligence technologies, digital tools can also be leveraged to strengthen supervision and evaluation during the certification process, improving the accuracy and transparency of data. Furthermore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on the interaction between women-friendly certification, corporate culture, employee behavior, and broader social change, to ensure that institutional measures can truly translate into substantive equality. Through these improvements and the concerted efforts of all stakeholders, women-friendly certification is expected to have a more lasting and profound impact in the future, providing stronger support and guarantees for achieving gender equality in the workplace.

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