

Giving women better career prospects

Across the rich world, women represent an important talent pool but most of them are not doing so well as men in the workplace. The four documents – two press articles that appeared in the Economist and the Guardian in 2011, an extract from Ian McEwan's novel *SOLAR* and a cartoon – tackle some aspects of the issue, trying to explain them and suggesting various solutions to solve the problem.

There is an obvious contrast between what women can achieve and what reality is. As shown in the Guardian article, girls in Britain's schools outperform boys at national exams and more of them now take traditionally male-dominated science subjects such as maths, technology and chemistry. However, according to a national study conducted by Ofsted, too many still choose 'female' courses like art and social care and get work-placements in beauty therapy, hairdressing, childcare and shops. In further education colleges, female students shun male areas like construction and engineering. As a result, most women are likely to get part-time and lower-paid jobs. Besides, few women hold top jobs: the Economist says that women are "only 15% of board members at big American firms, and 10% in Europe." The chart with the article shows that women are always a minority in executive positions, whatever the country is.

The reasons why the gender gap remains to be bridged are complex. Sexism in society is still a factor of inequality and discrimination. As featured in the cartoon, all male passengers aboard a plane look startled when their flight captain introduces herself: being a pilot is not regarded as a female job. And the Guardian confirms that gender-based stereotypes are mainly responsible for girls' choices of courses and careers. Another idea is that women prefer some subjects not because of bias but just because of 'innate differences'. Professor Beard, the character in *SOLAR* says psychological studies have proved that "from early in life, girls tended to be more interested in people, boys more in things and abstract rules." That explains why so few women become physicists, and he believes that things cannot really change. For the Economist this is a matter of family structure rather than sexism: child-caring means that women take career breaks, which prevents them from moving up the corporate ladder and from choosing some fields that consequently remain male bastions.

What to do to improve the situation? According to the Guardian, schools must try harder and encourage girls to enter 'male' areas ; they could boost girls' confidence by using successful women as role models. Schools must also give more information and advice on career paths and employers should help by providing quality-work placements.

The Economist does not consider the lack of role models to be an obstacle, and the paper rather advocates better corporate practices. Yet imposing quotas of women in boardrooms as some countries like France, Norway and Spain did is counter-productive, and merit should prevail over gender. Instead, companies must adopt family-friendly policies and offer women flexible schedules.

Changing attitudes toward women's place in the workforce seems to be the best way to fight deep-rooted prejudices and inequalities. Schools and employers have a key role to play to ensure that female talent is no longer wasted.