

A Perspective of Equality and Role for Women in IT

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INTRODUCTION

There are many disciplines and professions where women are not well represented, are paid less than male counterparts, and rise less quickly to leadership positions. IT is one such field, encompassing a broad range of topics from software development to telecommunications. This “inequality” has created a sense of injustice among some, leading to more aggressive stands for rights, for positive discrimination, and cries for all manner of “equality” within the workplace—specifically that male and female peers are able to play the same roles and indeed should have fair opportunity to play the same roles.

This article questions the “equality” that is pursued by the “equal opportunity” agenda. In many instances demanding women, given opportunities to take traditional male dominated positions in the workplace underlines the male-dominated world, what it values, and what it requires. A worldview that rejects male domination at its core may do more to help the “equality” of women and men. Moving toward this entails (1) recognising the roles played by women in the workplace and improving remuneration—rather than forcing women to take more male orientated roles, (2) couching the well remunerated roles that males play in more female friendly language to change perceptions of who is suitable for the role, and (3) recognising the female skills that many male roles require and not failing to give women novel workplace arrangements that permit pursuing roles outside the workplace.

In each of these suggestions the importance of male and female differences are recognised. This represents an understanding of “personhood”, that is, not forcing all people to be equal regardless of gender, but recognising the intrinsic worth of people above gender—and that there may be gender differences. The idea of intrinsic worth of people is based upon one theological perspective of personhood

drawn from the Christian tradition. It asks for equality of personhood to be recognised over and above gender issues and gender “differences” to be actually incorporated into professional environments.

GENDER EQUALITY

Women = An Unequal Discriminated Group

Data in the 1982 and 2000 reports from the National Science Foundation of America (NSF, 1982) indicate that women are a minority group in science and engineering fields. To this we can add IT (information technology). Relatively small percentages of women earn degrees in these fields; women are more likely than men to be employed part time (if the opportunity exists) and to be unemployed. Women doctoral scientists and engineers employed in educational institutions are less likely than men to be tenured or have the rank of full professor, and women scientists and engineers receive lower salaries than men. Many other reports would reveal the same basic inequality between genders, inequality that society is increasingly unable to tolerate. There are two basic approaches we may take to this inequality.

First, we may conclude that women are not treated in the same favourable way as men and conclude that there is discrimination. We would seek to focus on strategies to restore some moral order to society that rectifies the injustice done to the female gender. For example, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN, 1979) can be understood as a statement on what the principle of gender equality of opportunity should mean. Other definitions of gender equality point to the “discriminatory” nature of inequality. For example:

Gender equality means that there is no discrimination on grounds of a person's sex in the allocation of resources or benefits, or in the access to services. Gender equality may be measured in terms of whether there is equality of opportunity, or equality of results. (www.bigpond.com.kh/users/gad/glossary/gender.htm)

Second, we may more carefully consider what equality means and what the basis of equality is; we may question whether women are discriminated against, even whether efforts to alleviate the discrimination are actually only reinforcing the problem. Another definition of gender equality states, "Gender equality means that women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results" (www.socialpolicy.ca/g.htm). This definition is slightly improved since it focuses on realising human rights. It enables the possibility that men and women may realise those "rights" in different ways and so touches upon the main point of this article, the meaning of equality.

To some extent there has been recognition of a tendency to consider men's characteristics as the norm and women's characteristics as different from the norm, but it is not widespread. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) recognises "there are differences between the roles of men and women, differences that demand different approaches" (www.unfpa.org/gender/faq_gender.htm). In many places equality is taken to be women permitted to enter the male world on a level footing; not a recognition that there are "differences". In many instances the battles fought concern arguments over women "doing the same job". All these lines of reasoning and argument implicitly force women to "be the same" as men. A more equal opportunity might be to actually create valued roles that are designed for women.

Equality Based on Personhood

The deficiency in understanding equality has largely stemmed from the corresponding focus on gender that accompanies notions of equality. This article looks at a more fundamental equality of person. The

perspective resonates to some extent with the idea of human rights and that there is some more fundamental concept involved over gender, that of "being human". Equal opportunity based on personhood rather than role may sound like the antithesis to equal opportunity, based on recognising that those who can do the same job should be given the same chance. But it is an equal opportunity that would actually create roles that are perfectly suited to women, and just as valued in the workplace. It is actually based on an understanding of person that sees all people as equal, while recognising there are gender differences. These differences do not make people unequal, just different and suited to different tasks/roles. And it recognises that many workplaces are traditionally male dominated to the extent that the female role is eliminated.

The concept of equality that will be expanded here is a particular Christian perspective of personhood, in which all human beings are equal, regardless of gender, ethnic status, age, and so forth. It stems from a spiritual perspective of the person gained from Christian Scripture. Genesis 1:27 states, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The traditional Christian belief is that all persons are equal because they are made in the divine image, which was additionally the pinnacle of creation. This image bearing reality, which all humans possess, defines our personal worth, not the role we play. It is also the basis for true equality, but equal human beings are also different because they are male and female. Thus equality should not be defined by role played, but instead on "intrinsic worth". The Christian perspective does actually go on to suggest that God gave men and women different roles to play. Some Christian perspectives (e.g., Christian feminism) argue against the interpretation of these different roles and seek to make men and women play the same role (but there are a wide variety of theologies and types of feminism within Christianity) (Australian Catholic University, 2005). In arguing against different roles, the dignity of personhood and value that comes from simply being in God's image, equal but different (Ortlund, 1995) is somehow lost.

What are some of those differences of personhood that may underpin gender differences, without undermining personhood equality? In very general

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