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FEMINISM AND THE GLASS CEILING



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“Feminist: A person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Aware of the positive effect that gender equality has on economic growth and sustainable development, the member states of the United Nations committed themselves in 2000 to the Millennium Development Goals, and since 2015 through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), to achieve gender equality and to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls.

However, although not surprising, the results of Ipsos Global Advisor⁶ on general attitudes towards gender equality are curious. The majority of people surveyed globally (and eight out of ten in Colombia) agree to the aim of equality between men and women, but only one third (38% in Colombia) define themselves as a feminist. It seems, and consequently has been sold by different sectors in the country, that the qualifier “feminist” has a negative connotation and was not seen as the search for equality between people of different sexes, which, as a priority, should be something positive for any society.

When thinking of gender inequality in the work environment, this refers to different issues such as: sexual harassment, reconciliation between the personal and work life balance, access to the labour market, wage gaps and the real possibility of accessing leadership positions within an organization.

When Ipsos Global Advisor explored the biggest problems facing women and girls, harassment and sexual violence were mentioned most worldwide, followed by unequal pay between men and women, which had a few more mentions than in the previous survey in 2018. In Colombia, in addition to the previous ones, physical violence against women also stood out, as a problem that had the greatest number of mentions among the men surveyed.

Nonetheless, when asked about the most important actions needed to achieve gender equality, 36% of respondents (40% in Colombia) suggested equal pay between men and women who undertake the same role. In the same vein they considered that other actions that would have a positive impact on achieving equality between the sexes, would be for men to assume greater responsibility for child rearing and home care, and for employers to make greater efforts to promote women to leadership positions.

More than half of the respondents in Colombia (56%) do not think that enough is currently being done to achieve equality with regard to child and household care. Although, when compared to the global average, there is more confidence that the situation will improve within the next 20 years: 46% in Colombia vs. 39% globally.

With regards to access to the labour market, according to figures from the National Administrative Department of Statistics (Dane) the unemployment rate (UR) closed at 10.2 in September 2019 (vs. 9.5 in 2018). However, the UR is higher among women by almost 5 points (8.1 in men and 13 in women), despite the fact that the educational gap of women has closed in recent decades.

In the labour market, inequalities are not only given in terms of access, but also in terms of the wage gap and possibilities for promotion within organizations, as mentioned before. According to UNDP figures, globally there is a salary differentiation between men and women of approximately 23 points: for every 100 pesos a man earns, a woman in the same role earns 77 pesos. Colombia is no exception, and there are even sources that speak of a differentiation of up to 30 points.

Finally, we have the “glass ceiling” understood to be barriers that are not officially recognized, but that prevent or obstruct the professional advancement of some social groups, in this case of women, to grow vertically within an organization. The expression “glass ceiling” was coined more than forty years ago (1978) by Marilyn Loden, who is today a writer and consultant on gender and workplace discrimination, and although the world has undoubtedly made efforts to reduce discrimination towards women, the problem is still valid. The “glass ceiling” does not refer exclusively to the inability of women to access certain positions within a hierarchical structure, but also to whether their ideas or proposals are taken into account and valued.

Nowadays, it is not enough for companies to have equal numbers of men and women on their board of directors (parity) or that there is even an equitable remuneration policy, it is necessary to have policies that allow equal treatment for men and women, where different leadership styles are valued.

In Loden's words, speaking of the biases of the glass ceiling, *“I mean the biases that assume that men are 'innate leaders', that working mothers are not committed to their careers, that women are too emotional...”*

Understanding and accepting that diversity is a key component for development will allow equity to be a reality, not simply an issue that has to be discussed and studied.