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CSR as a Mean to Promote Gender Equality

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore the theme of gender equality, which is determined both by culture and mentality of each country, together with its connections with corporate social responsibility (CSR). In particular the paper examines how CSR can be a potential policy instrument useful for the advancement of gender equality. The capability to boost economic development and growth implies the need to encourage equal involvement of men and women yet in education and then in labour force, to ensure full utilization of available national resources. Despite the progress occurred in economic and social development, gender equality remains challenge both in political and economic decision-making worldwide. The topic of gender equality is assuming a growing role also at firm's level as a key factor for strengthening CSR strategies. In this framework, the paper analyses two best practices: Luisa Spagnoli and Arup. Luisa Spagnoli was a social pioneer in the promotion of gender equality after the First World War, a true advocate for workingwomen and dedicated to improving quality of life for all her employees.

Lo scopo del lavoro è quello di esplorare il tema della parità di genere, che è determinata sia dalla cultura sia dalla mentalità di ogni paese, insieme alle sue connessioni con la Responsabilità Sociale d'Imprese (RSI). In particolare, il documento esamina come la RSI può essere un potenziale strumento di politica utile per il progresso della parità di genere. La capacità di promuovere lo sviluppo economico e la crescita implica la necessità di promuovere la parità di coinvolgimento di uomini e donne nell'istruzione e nella forza lavoro, al fine di garantire il pieno utilizzo delle risorse nazionali disponibili. Nonostante i progressi verificatisi nello sviluppo economico e sociale, la parità di genere rimane una sfida sia nelle decisioni politiche sia in quelle economiche di tutto il mondo. Il tema della parità di genere sta assumendo un ruolo sempre più importante anche a livello di impresa come fattore chiave per rafforzare le strategie di RSI. In questo quadro, il documento analizza due buone pratiche: Luisa Spagnoli e Arup. Luisa Spagnoli è stata un pioniere sociale nella promozione della parità di genere, dopo la prima guerra mondiale. E' stata una vera e propria sostenitrice delle donne lavoratrici, volta a migliorare la qualità della vita per tutti i suoi dipendenti.

Keywords: CSR, gender equality, women engagement, social-economic development, smart economics.

1 – Introduction: focus on the problem

A gender imbalance in the labour market is a problem faced all the world (Khoreva, 2009). The problem is growing in the framework of globalization, which

deepens the gap between men and women in terms of access to both political-economic power and resources.

The World Development Report 2012 (World Bank, 2012; Wong, 2012) dedicated to Gender Equality and Development affirmed the positive correlation

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between: 1) the Index of Economic Participation and Opportunity measuring the female–male ratio in labour market participation, wages, and incomes and; 2) the GDP level per capita and overall level of welfare.

Gender equality is not only connected with the protection of human rights, but also with economic efficiency and economic development. Nowadays, national economies devote a great deal of attention to resource efficiency; therefore gender equality represents a key factor for leveraging economic growth. Gender equality leads to “smart economics” (Buvinic and King, 2007). This supports the economic empowerment of women and increases investment in female human capital. The returns are not only for women, but also for men, children and the whole nation. At the same time, the economic rationale and the tenets of social justice, which encompass different bases for women’s rights, are not always respected when women are fully engaged in labour activities (Sepashvili, 2003). The first implies maximum utilization of available female human resources, thus causing their exploitation by imposing a double burden on women. The second underlines the importance of equal rights and opportunities for both men and women and is aimed at harmonising the development of the entire society. Meanwhile, equal opportunities and rights suggest women’s equal participation in the country’s political, economic, cultural and social life. These are the areas that policy makers have to address. The important message to be considered is that gender equality does matter in achieving the ultimate goal of increasing welfare provision for the entire population (Sepashvili, 2012).

Gender economics (Jashi, 2005) examines the disparity between the socio-economic status of women and men, determined by gender roles and relations. The main subjects of gender economic analysis are the usage and control of resources, employment, the distribution of income and welfare, the execution of property rights, managing financial leverage and establishing institutional, social, political, demographic and geopolitical factors, all factors critical for gender economic equality.

The aim of this research is to study how CSR can be a potential policy instrument useful for the advancement of gender equality.

2 – Research methodology

In the paper first the problem under analysis is identified: when people talk of gender problems in focus groups, or when relevant questions are posited, then the problem becomes clear, but otherwise the impression is that there is no gender discrimination. This is especially true of men, who feel no burden of discrimination.

Discrimination is often not seen clearly for what it is, as it is caused by structural factors and social attitudes. Therefore, structural gender discrimination is always difficult to identify, especially when the economic aspect of the problem is discussed. Economic aspects are frequently neglected due to the fact that they are often hidden. Society does not recognize the existence of gender discrimination, in particular in the labour market, often there are numerous traditional, but erroneous, stereotypes in society (Surmanidze, 1998). After that the paper provides a review of the literature about the relationship between CSR and gender equality.

In the last part, the paper analyses two companies that have embedded CSR policies in their business strategies and, in this framework, are strongly involved in the promotion of gender equality: Luisa Spagnoli, a social pioneer in the promotion of gender equality after the First World War dedicated to improving quality of life for all her employees; and Arup, a current example of enterprise strongly committed to the promotion of gender equality, as evidenced by his presence at the top of the *The Times*’s ranking “Top 50 Employers for Women 2015”.

3 – Literature review

Despite the progress in many sectors, gender equality remains a challenge in political and economic decision-making more or less everywhere in the world. Studies carried out in this field (Khitariashvili, 2009; Sumbadze, 2008; Sabedashvili, 2007) show that the concept of gender equality and the need for its application and implementation in society have been imposed by international organizations. The term ‘gender’ was introduced from the West nevertheless, the gender equality concept and problems related to gender relations are still only vaguely understood. The situation is even worse for issues related to the economy and gender (Shioshvili, Chavleishvili and Khashidze, 1998).

According to Babcock (2012), “companies with a significant number of women at the top are better practitioners of CSR and sustainability than other firms and are delivering big wins for business and society”. Furthermore, the diverse points for discussions concerned with gender and CSR in some latterly issued points of view might be addressed to the former debate on philanthropy and CSR (Babcock, 2012; Testa, 2012).

Evidences found by Grosser and Moon (2005) suggest gender equality information being requested within several CSR related reporting frameworks, these requirements are mostly limited in scope, or remain optional elements. They had investigated the nature and extent of relevant stakeholder opportunities to explain this unfulfilled potential (Scholz, 2012). Furthermore, Grosser and Moon (2008) moved towards

the research of the extent to which external reporting by UK best practice companies includes performance information about gender equality in the workplace.

Lately relationship between women directors and CSR had been analyzed by Bernardi and Threadgill (2010) and Setó-Pamies (2013). Their expectation was that gender diversity will increase socially responsible behaviour by a corporation. Setó-Pamies (2013) also found that the results supported the hypothesis on gender diversity's positive influence upon CSR: female talent can play a strategic role in enabling firms to manage their social responsibility and sustainable practices appropriately.

In stating the multidimensional nature of CSR (Gazzola and Mella, 2015), European Commission (2011) had also addressed gender issues, as one of actual labour and employment practices, which visibility and dissemination of good practices should be enhanced (Rita and Agota, 2014).

In this paper we analyze the main drivers of gender equality: the governmental decisions and CSR.

4 – Luisa Spagnoli

Luisa Spagnoli was born in 1877 in Perugia, Italy. She was one of the most forward-thinking women of its times. Spagnoli develops innovative entrepreneurial initiatives when nobody knows CSR, despite the adverse social context and the dominant culture, focusing on one of the most interesting periods in Perugia's history (1924-1935). Luisa Spagnoli put Perugia on the industrial map in not one, but two major sectors: confectionary, with Perugia and fashion, with the angora wool factory.

She was involved in the commitment to the improvement of working conditions. In 1922 the company employed approximately 400 workers, 300 of whom were women. Luisa Spagnoli develops many initiatives in order to support working mothers and improves the workers conditions: she introduced a company kindergarten, a nursing mother's rooms to allow mothers to come back to work as soon as possible, summer camps from which 30-40 female workers with poor health would come back stronger and more peaceful and more industrious; a number of leisure initiative such as trip and after work activities representing a sort of corporate paternalism (Bellucci, Mari, Picciaia and Terzani, 2016.)

The Perugia welfare system had unusual characteristics due to the presence of woman in the roles of both entrepreneur and worker, indicating an innovative relationship that was apparently closer and more sensitive to the need of the recipients. This was a new approach with which to manage human resources, to control the workforce and improve productivity. The success of Perugia is famous in all the word.

5 – Arup

Arup is an engineering consulting company, with a strong commitment to CSR and a corporate vision based on values like care, consideration, respect, inclusion. The company strongly believes that the choices Arup makes today will impact on what happens tomorrow, not only at firm's level but for the whole society. In this perspective, Arup is committed to using their expertise, creativity and innovation to make this world a better place for all.

For the sixth consecutive year, Arup has been named in "The Times Top 50 Employers for Women", formally recognising the firm as one of the top 50 companies in the UK that are leading the way in gender equality in the workplace. Gender equality is a key part of Arup's business strategy, with consistent commitment to creating workplaces and cultures that are inclusive of women from entry level through to senior leadership: 35 percent of all employees are women, but only 20 percent of them are leaders. The company aims to increase both rates by 2020, and to match female representation at the leaders' level with the total percentage of women working at Arup.

On the other side, Arup is involved in promoting engineering as an inclusive profession which values, supports and celebrates the contributions of women.

Arup takes its role as an ambassador for women working in the built environment seriously. In order to produce work of high quality and maintain the firm's reputation for innovation and creativity, Arup understands it must fully embrace the skills, talents and knowledge that only a diverse workforce can deliver. The company is committed to inspiring young girls to enter the engineering profession and aims to increase the proportion of female employees in this so-called "male profession" through several initiatives; at the same time Arup is involved to counteract the projected shortage of specialists. Gender equality and gender promotion are playing today a key part in the company business strategy.

6 – Discussion: the main drivers of gender equality

There are two many drivers of the gender equality: Governmental decisions and CSR.

As regard the first driver a country has to have sufficient budgetary/financial resources to achieve gender equality and to finance the household function of women. At the same time, respect for human rights, democracy, rule of law and transparency are those factors which are necessary, but not sufficient, to guarantee equal opportunities for men and women in both the economic and social framework. Positive gender discrimination also plays a crucial role.

The development and proper utilization of the labour potential of both genders should stand high among the priorities of every national economic development strategy (Sepashvili, 2011). The rationale for this is simple: half, even more, of the population of any country are female. Whenever the national economy does not fully engage with women labour, it means the country wastes resources.

Simultaneously, efforts should be directed to raise labour productivity to ensure higher returns on labour inputs. As noted above, increasing resource efficiency is intimately connected to the growth of welfare levels.

Hence, when we suggest putting emphasis on high skilled workers, biological disparity between genders does not matter at all, as it plays no role in the performance of cognitive tasks in the work place. Thus, the utilisation of women's labour potential, which typically represents at least half the entire human resource capital of any given country, represents one of the important goals for policy makers to meet the challenges of contemporary development.

Fostering greater equality between women and men is not only a goal in and of itself, but also a key factor to sustain economic growth, social development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Economic, social, cultural and environmental concerns need to be approached in an integrated and holistic manner. This involves taking into account women and men's different needs, roles, and opportunities to ensure that they can equally participate in and benefit from the transition to a greener economy and, more broadly, sustainable development.

Meanwhile, political will is a decisive factor in promoting and achieving gender equality, as public actor, in all countries, is directly involved in creating the conditions for the modernization of both the economic and social system by assuming a long-term perspective.

The second driver of gender equality both in the workplace and the society, according to our view, is CSR. Equality and diversity in the workplace are the main pillars of CSR. Companies able to compete on the global market are increasingly addressing the gender equality agenda and are including it within their CSR strategies.

The inclusion of the gender perspective in CSR policies and practices can play a dynamic role in achieving gender equality in the workplace through the implementation of activities, initiatives, strategies that provide equal access to job opportunities to female employees and provide for equality of the treatment of women in the workplace. Companies are also increasingly aware about the need to include gender equality initiatives and strategies in CSR reporting in the perspective to improve company transparency and social accountability with regard to gender impacts. These practices could enable stakeholders

engagement on these issues and can act as a tool to improve companies' reputation.

7 – Conclusions

The two main drivers previously analysed have to work together. Gender discrimination cannot be prevented only through legislative regulations; CSR is an important tool to attain political goals.

In order to advance in gender equality a combination of legal compliance, the business case, and social regulation in the form of stakeholder expectations and pressures is needed (Grosser and Moon 2005). Implementation of CSR policies should take gender equality aspects more fully into account and promote them through the adoption and implementation of CSR principles and employment policies.

Since the implementation of CSR is increasingly becoming a strategic issue for enterprises, CSR has a great potential to enhance gender equality: equal opportunities for men and women are the key elements of a social responsible enterprise in its internal dimension. The two examples previously introduced show the positive influence of CSR on both gender equality and the reputation of the companies.

The European Union on the other hand fosters in its gender equality politics the strategy of gender mainstreaming (Treaty of the European countries, Amsterdam 1996/1999). Strategically, gender mainstreaming implies 'the systematic consideration of the differences between the conditions, situations and needs of women and men in all Community policies and actions' (Council of Europe 1998). Also Gender mainstreaming is besides legislation an important tool to attain political goals.

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