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Women's appearance as the focus of attention in organizations

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Abstract

This teaching case focuses on appearance and gender discrimination in the workplace. Previous studies show, for example, that appearance, women's especially, can be an invisible mechanism of discrimination and interpreted as a justification for sexual and gender-based harassment. Prior research also indicates that women suffer from gendered ageism, also related to looks. However, issues about appearance are seldom analysed from the perspectives of organizational (mal)practices and women's career barriers and problems. This teaching case presents the case of Anna. The case is meant for management and organization students at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Anna is a well-educated young professional who is considered a 'pretty woman' where she works. Anna wants to build a career in a field where men have traditionally been the decision-makers. In the case the following questions are in focus: What are the similarities and differences between gender discrimination, sexual harassment, professional behaviour and common politeness in organizational life? How does appearance affect career success? And finally, what are the consequences of the non-merit-based evaluation of workers and managers? With the help of this teaching case, students will deepen their knowledge and understanding of gendered practices related to appearance as a potential source of discrimination and harassment in career and organizational life in general. Additionally, the relevant outcomes with regard to both the woman and the organization are of interest.

Keywords: ageism, discrimination, gender, harassment, organizational behaviour, teaching case, virtue ethics

Women's appearance as the focus of attention in organizations

Throughout the world, women face more problems in their careers than men (Billing, 2011; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). Some of these problems are visible and easily recognized while others are hidden and discussed only reluctantly in organizations (Tuori, 2014). According to Tuori (*ibid.*, p. 173), ambiguities and challenges around inequalities are especially difficult to make the subject of discussion in work organizations. In general, questions around inequalities are both legal and ethical problems that may not be easy to solve (Geva, 2006). There is therefore a tendency for management to neglect the problem, which leads to escalation of the problem and, finally, to negative consequences for both the organizations themselves and for the individuals working in them (Hiekkataipale & Lämsä, 2017).

Previous studies show that appearance, especially women's, can be an invisible mechanism of discrimination and interpreted as a justification for sexual and gender-based harassment (McKie & Jyrkinen, 2017). Prior research also indicates that women suffer from gendered ageism, also related to looks (*ibid.*). However, issues about appearance are seldom analysed from the perspectives of organizational (mal)practices and women's career barriers and problems.

This teaching case presents the case of Anna. The case is meant to be analysed and discussed primarily with management and organization students at the graduate level. In particular, it would be appropriate to use this teaching case in courses on organizational behaviour, human resource management, management and leadership as well as business ethics.

Anna is a well-educated young professional who is considered a 'pretty woman' in her working context. Anna wants to build a career in a field where men have traditionally been the decision-makers. In the case the following questions are in focus: What are the similarities and

differences between gender discrimination, sexual harassment, professional behaviour and common politeness in organizational life? How does appearance affect career success? And finally, what are the consequences of the non-merit-based evaluation of workers and managers? With the help of this teaching case, students will deepen their knowledge and understanding of gendered practices related to appearance as a potential source of discrimination and harassment in career and organizational life in general. Additionally, the relevant outcomes to both the woman and the organization are of interest.

Presentation of the case

Course

The case is targeted to graduate students of management and organization studies. The case could also be used on courses at the undergraduate level if the amount of additional reading were reduced. Courses on organizational behaviour, human resource management, management and leadership, and business ethics are where the case of Anna could most appropriately be analysed and discussed.

Learning outcomes

After completing the course the student

1. will be able to demonstrate the ability to understand the gendered nature of organizations,
2. will be able to identify and evaluate the role of gendered practices at work and outside work that affect different people's inclusion and exclusion in working life,
3. will be able to identify and analyse different factors that make women's career development more difficult than men's,
4. will be able to demonstrate the ability to analyse an ethical problem at workplaces

related to gender and age discrimination, and to make constructive suggestions to solve the problem,

5. will be aware of and able to analyse the issue of equality between genders globally and in her/his home country.

Description of the case

After coming home from work, Anna told her parents that she was considering moving back abroad:

“I cannot believe that the perception about female and male roles has still not changed here after all those years I spent abroad. My understanding of basic communication at work, politeness and ethically acceptable organization culture are so different from those of many of my colleagues that I cannot work productively and feel comfortable in the workplace. Instead of spending time and energy trying to prove myself as an equal partner to male colleagues, I could easily go back abroad to a better and more equal environment. At least I would be taken as a respected and competent colleague and be able to focus on my work instead of trying to prove that my looks and age have nothing to do with my competence at work.”

Anna opened LinkedIn and started to browse for job offerings abroad.

Anna is a 28-year-old woman who is ambitious and well-educated. Like many of those of the Y-generation, from her teenage years she has always aimed to work in a place that enables career development and balance between work and other parts of life. The Y-generation is typically defined as people born in the 1980s and 90s. Although there is no exact agreement as to what constitutes a generation, it is normally considered to cover a range of about 20 years (Pendergast, 2010, p. 2). A study conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers found that, for

example, corporate responsibility (including workplace ethics) is critical to the Y-generation, and the great majority (88%) of the Y-generation look for an employer whose values match their own (Ng et al., 2010).

Many of Anna's friends of the same age have become citizens of the world, who understand their identities as cosmopolitan rather than located in a particular place, whether country or region (see Siljanen & Lämsä, 2009). Crossing borders both physically and mentally is easy for such people. Many of Anna's friends have taken the opportunity to get higher education abroad and/or to develop their careers internationally. Anna, like her friends, left her country almost ten years ago, right after graduation from high school, to get her higher education abroad. She obtained her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from an institution listed among the world's top universities.

While she was doing her Master's degree, Anna was offered a tempting job in her field of study. She accepted the offer. Her work performance was widely appreciated in the organization and she was a valued team member. Most importantly, she loved her job. Nevertheless, she missed her family back home and began to toy with the idea of returning home. She felt some responsibility for returning and using her competence for the good of her homeland, and she also saw her parents aging and knew that she would need to take care of them later in life. Her elder brother lived in another part of the country and said that it would be difficult for him to look after their parents. Anna easily accepted his point because he had a demanding job.

Anna decided to apply for a job in her former hometown. She was aware of the changes and some challenges she would be likely to face when moving back, but she was also excited at the thought of going back and spending more time with her family. She found a job offer that sounded interesting and inspiring. Moving back meant giving up life in a metropolis, taking a pay cut, and no longer being able to see her friends from abroad so often, but the anticipated hardships did not put her

off. Anna's mother, however, was more concerned about her decision. She wondered whether Anna remembered that there were still cultural differences, and that the working culture was likely to be more traditional and autocratic than what Anna was used to. Anna was of the opinion that although she could not settle for intolerance and narrow mindedness, she could easily adapt back into the local culture. Although Anna appreciated her mother's concern, she did not let her comments deter her. She especially felt a strong moral obligation to work for her own country.

Anna's job application was successful: the company she was hoping to work for, which very much valued Anna's international education and international work experience, finally made her a generous offer. So Anna moved back home. She was thrilled with her new position and luckily the job proved to be everything she had hoped for. It was exceptionally interesting and at the same time offered numerous challenges. Anna started working on several projects which she initiated and/or was appointed to lead. Due to her dedication and motivation, her work was recognized by the board and her superiors almost immediately. Even some colleagues quickly noticed her hard and successful work. But the praise was given only by some of her peers, and they were a minority. Anna was often quite unhappy because she felt that some of her colleagues were not taking her seriously. She heard rumours about herself, to the effect that she was too young, too pretty and too ambitious to do her job well. Additionally, she heard some of her colleagues say that she was regarded as a successful and competent employee because "the head of the firm likes young, slim, blonde women."

Anna was, indeed, a young, good-looking, slim, blonde-haired woman who always dressed in an elegant but "business-like" style. But despite her achievements at work, according to many colleagues, her appearance was always a topic of interest to her work-mates/colleagues. Her competence was often ignored. She was also very aware of doubting comments about her ability to carry out demanding tasks because of her age, as she was younger than most of her colleagues. No

matter whether the colleagues were women or men, the comments dealt with her looks and age.

Most of Anna's colleagues were men. She soon noticed that in the firm (and in this sector generally) it was always men who held leading positions and were the key decision-makers. Even though the idea of the well-educated, hard-working woman has been accepted in public discourse, many fields of working life, such as the financial, military and industrial sectors, are still male dominated. As a result, women tend to face more problems in their careers than men (Elmuti, Jia, & Davis, 2009; The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). Anna understood that the organizational culture in the company downplayed women's talents and abilities, and that made it more difficult for her and other women to advance to managerial positions.

One day, after overhearing that a male colleague had volunteered to be a member of Anna's project just "to work with such a good-looking woman", Anna told the colleague, "I will decide who I want on my team soon. My primary concern is to concentrate on people's competence as the main criterion for selection. This will enable the team to achieve higher goals." After this incident, Anna decided to speak to her boss about her experiences and the firm's culture. She mentioned that the behaviour she was experiencing was humiliating, and she wished that people could be recognized for their work rather than for what they wore or how they looked. Anna said: "People can have different social roles, but in the working environment I want to be recognized primarily as a good specialist in my field, not as a good-looking woman." Her boss, who had always supported and respected her, and had been more a mentor than a boss to her, agreed and said that such behaviour was completely unacceptable.

After speaking to her boss, Anna tried to be more relaxed and not take to heart her colleagues' comments. She tried to ignore their comments, but not much changed at work. The only thing in the company that changed was that a new executive board and CEO were selected. These changes,

however, did not bring about the changes in organizational culture that Anna had hoped for.

In the meantime, the easygoing and outspoken Anna was quickly recognized by the new CEO. Anna received new strategic tasks and prepared reports on topics crucial to the company's success. She represented the company as an expert in many important meetings on the national level. Although the clever, sharp-minded Anna was often there as an expert, she occasionally found men paying attention to her looks that she would rather not have received. At a team dinner with the executive board, where Anna was the only woman, a man commented positively on the dress she was wearing while she was still at the table. The dress was designed by a well-known fashion designer, and it was certainly very elegant and quite expensive. Other men at the table were laughing and teasing Anna, asking about the price and the name of the designer, apparently enjoying themselves at her expense. Embarrassed, Anna tried to strike back with suggestions that they should start to discuss what the men were wearing, but she could not change the tone of the discussion. Instead, the men just teased her the more, thinking that they were being amusing. Anna kept silent then. When the dinner was over, she left, feeling very frustrated and unable to stop thinking about the next day's meeting with the same people.

Anna is now considering moving back abroad. Although her work is exciting and interesting, she does not see much of a future for herself in that environment. She is confused: on the one hand she loves her job very much, and on the other hand she feels uncomfortable, embarrassed and angry with the company culture and the habit of evaluating women on the basis of their appearance rather than their competence. Anna thinks that under such circumstances she will hardly be able to make the successful career she dreams of. Also, most of her friends live abroad in various big cities where Anna thinks life is hectic but people's attitudes are open-minded and tolerant. She likes her home country and loves seeing her parents regularly but,

sadly, she feels that the values such as equal treatment and equal opportunities that she appreciates are not appreciated in workplaces there. One day, two and a half years after returning to her native land, Anna received an enticing work offer from an international company located in one of the world's major centres.

Conclusion

This teaching case dealt with Anna, a well-educated young professional who is regarded as a 'pretty woman' in her workplace. Despite her interesting and inspiring work, she experiences teasing, harassment and discrimination based on her gender and age. These are embedded in the organizational culture of the workplace. Anna also recognizes differences between the treatment of women in her home country, where she is currently working, and the country where she studied and worked for several years without experiencing the same kind of difficulties as she is experiencing now. Things come to a head when Anna finds herself in various critical situations in which she feels embarrassed and unable to make any changes. She begins to think about moving abroad again, but does not really know what to do.

In this case, students are put in Anna's position and asked to consider what to do and why. The various viewpoints and understandings of the case show students that the gender-based discrimination and ethical problems related to gendered organizational life are not simple, but rather, complex and often difficult to solve. This case highlights how gender-based problems are often silenced in organizational life and the fact that there are no mechanisms in place for dealing with them. There may be policies on equality and non-discrimination, but often they are not implemented.

Questions for students

1. Using the newest Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum,

analyse the state of gender equality in your country and how your country is ranked among the countries around the world listed in the report. What are the main problems and strengths in relation to gender equality in your country? Why is it important for societies, work organizations and individuals to advance gender equality?

2. Analyse what kind of practices in the case organization on the one hand support Anna's inclusion in the organization and, on the other, lead to her discrimination and exclusion?
3. Did Anna experience gender discrimination, sexual harassment and/or just everyday politeness? Why? How do these concepts differ?
4. Characterize Anna and analyse the virtues and vices she has in relation to equality. Characterize the organizational culture of the employing company and analyse the virtues and vices of the organization in relation to equality. How can the organizational culture of the case organization be changed to respect equality?
5. How does Anna's career look in the long term in both the case organization and in general? What should Anna do now in terms of her work? What do you suggest and why?
6. What do you think the management of the case company should do to keep Anna employed with them?

Additional reading materials

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