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# SOCIAL ECONOMY APPROACH TO CREATING GENDER SAFE WORKPLACES



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Boys will be boys”, you’ve heard it on the playground and the classroom, but have you heard it in the workplace? By the time these boys are men in the workforce, the reinforcement of this phrase has resulted in the normalization of aggression towards women. The behavior of men has been forgiven as biological nature rather than be branded as destructive. The combination of homogenizing aggression as well as inflated confidence of males has resulted in females not claiming their place at the table. A study conducted by The School of Applied Psychology found that the strongest predictors of overestimating IQ were biological sex and then psychological gender. Being born male was associated with an inflated intellectual self-image. This has correlated to men in the workplace as being extremely hubris while females exhibit humility.

However, the modesty with which women define their intellect translates to young girls undervaluing their work in future careers, as well as not reporting incidents of harassment. Scholars have suggested that “women have a greater fear of failure than men, so they behave more conservatively when they undertake business ventures” (Block).

The underlying fear females have in pursuing a business venture has manifested into a preference for the cooperatives’ business model. Research has found that cooperatives appeal to women because they are “less risky as they are organizations aimed at cost and profit sharing” (Salvador). While cooperatives have benefited women by integrating themselves into a business context without having to worry about financial repercussions, why do females shy away from independently starting their own company or taking a management position in the public sector?

The history of women has been one of sharing which is why the cost and profit-sharing model cooperatives offer is so appealing. In fact, the English common law of the 1700s stated “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in the law. The very being and legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated into that of her husband under whose wing and protection she performs everything” (Timeline). The “suspension” of legal existence has become transferable into the overwhelming acceptance of invisibility at the hand of a male. Historically, women have acclimated to sacrificing their identity and equality in order to preserve relationships.



Women were used to the limitations of financial autonomy as it was not until 1922 that they were able to independently own property in England.

The deeply rooted submission of women has led to an unconscious predisposition to pursue financial independence. However, according to Fidelity, an American Investment Platform, 2021 Women & Investing Study, women's investment returns were 0.4% higher than men's on average (Fidelity). However, "44% of Europeans still think that the most critical role of women is to take care of their home and family" (EC, 2017).

The homogenization of low confidence and limiting gender roles has permeated women subconsciously with apprehension. While they could outperform men, as indicated by Fidelity's research, they choose to pursue safer paths.

The work done by Diesis Network in the past years has highlighted how Social Economy business models are contributing to women's empowerment and achieving gender equality. Early in 2022, Diesis drafted a Gender Equality Plan aimed at navigating and accelerating the gender equality journey that the organization must take to improve its performance.

Later that year, Diesis published a working paper titled Gender equality and women empowerment in social economy enterprises: enablers and barriers. This paper used literature reviews and cases to highlight SEEs role in shrinking the ratio of male to female entrepreneurs by giving more attention to social economy enterprises. In all global economies men are more likely to manage LLCs as women only represent  $\frac{1}{4}$  of new business owners and directors while men stand for  $\frac{3}{4}$  (Meunier). However, in OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) women often make up more than 60% of the workforce in the social economy" (Advancing Gender Equality). Thus, SEE organizations are pivotal in addressing employment gender gaps because they mobilize contributions of females whose voices would otherwise remain unheard.

Diesis has demonstrated a momentous effort in the past few years to promote gender equality and give visibility to females working at corporate and social enterprises. As more women enter careers in business, the different levels and mediums of harassment have increased.

For example, "15% of women who have experienced sexual harassment at work reported an increase in online harassment whilst working from home during Covid-19" (Rights). Due to the pandemic, the channels through which harassment can occur have widened and enabled perpetrators of GBV (Gender Based Violence). Diesis has maintained relationships with many active organizations within the EU looking to fight GBV in the workplace. Of its most important works in the topic, we can highlight Cease project, in which Diesis partnered with Pour la Solidarité, FACE Foundation and CSR Hellas. The project seeks to involve companies as new actors in ceasing gender-based violence thanks to their capacity to multiply the effects of their actions and significant leading role in our society and their large mobilization capacity has also launched the Set The Tone Project which encompasses a Charter of Engagement, 4-hour GBV prevention online training, & 8-hour in-person-person training delivered in multiple countries. The online training of Set The Tone is designed to improve the competencies of employers, and employees in the prevention and reporting of cases of sexual harassment in the workplace.



From the Set The Tone Final Conference - November 25th, 2022, Brussels.



25 November 2022, on the International Day for the elimination of violence against women, Diesis organized the conference Be The Change: Making Workplaces Safe from Sexual Harassment in Brussels.

The purpose of the conference was for alliance members from countries across the EU to present practices that gave insight into setbacks and progress made in their respective workplaces. The event was also an opportunity for enterprises and companies for unification and commitment to the future of workers in Europe. A variety of speakers from diverse industries presented including European Agency for Health and Safety at Work, European Women's Lobby, European Trade Union Confederation, European Economic and Social Committee, Social Economy Europe and Business Professional Women. The conference concluded with a member from The Commission's Directorate-General (DG) for Justice and Consumers, Kirsten Leube, reporting on the effectiveness of Set The Tone initiative and how it will be used to shape policy changes at the EU level.

Sexual harassment is damaging for the victim, workplace environment, and the pockets of companies having to clean up the lawsuits of their employees. The glass ceiling may be a metaphor for invisible barriers that prevent women from achieving, but the harassment females endure is too visible to overlook. We live in a world where the classic "...boys will be boys"" will soon be followed by "and girls can be harassed".

Other important work of Diesis on this same topic is the PROTECT project which seeks to enhance the ability of women workers, employers, and VET professionals in recognizing and tackling workplace mobbing and raise awareness of different kinds of forms abuse can take in the workplace. Gender considerations are indeed crucial to the achievement of Diesis's vision and mission to contribute to the SDGs and build a fair and sustainable future for the social economy.

Over all the years working on the topic, its work has showed that collaborative work, social economy and social entrepreneurship could be promoted both as models for tackling inequality and as models for greater social inclusion and cohesion.

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