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How Far Have We Got? A Longitudinal Analysis of Views of Public Relations Practitioners on the Position of Women in the PR Industry

Paper presented at IHPRC, organised by the Bournemouth University (6-7 July 2016), <https://microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/>

Introduction

It has been well established that Public Relations is a gendered industry, evidenced by the number of women working in the industry has grown considerably in the past decades (CIPR State of the Profession Report 2015; Verhoeven & Aarts 2010; Fitch & Third 2010; Daymon & Demetrious 2010; Wyatt 2013; Aldoory & Toth 2002). However, even though Public Relations is a predominantly female industry, female practitioners face obstacles in achieving equality with their male colleagues. The most common problems are the wage gap and the glass ceiling (Grunig et al 2001; Place 2015; Merchant 2012; Fröhlich and Peters 2007).

Liberal feminism has been arguing for a long time that women face inequality in all aspects of society, and proponents of this view advocate change of the social system asking that women are allowed to compete for the same positions as men, and that they are treated equally (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). The radical feminism, on the other hand has been arguing for decades that women are systematically oppressed by men and that the laws of patriarchy still exist and can be found in the social system based on historical inequality (ibid).

Using liberal feminism of the lack of equality among men and women while embracing the view of radical feminism that patriarchy is still alive, the aim of this paper is to discuss how far have we got in gender equality? In the following sections the paper will therefore discuss liberal feminist approach and juxtapose it against radical feminism. After that, we will present findings from the European Communications Monitor, the largest European survey on public relations (PR) professionals where they were asked to self-assess situation in the industry and the position of women.

The Position of Women in Public Relations and the Liberal Feminism

It has been widely accepted that public relations has become a gendered profession (Verhoeven & Aarts 2010; Fitch & Third 2010; Daymon & Demetrious 2010) because majority of PR professionals are now females. This is not the case only in the United States where gendering first occurred, but also in other countries such as Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia (Bentele & Junghanel 2004; Fitch & Third 2010; Verhoeven & Aarts 2010), and the UK where women form majority of employees in public relations (The House of Commons Report 2014; CIPR State of the Profession Report 2016) but are still paid significantly less than their male colleagues even if they managed to achieve senior

managerial positions in larger numbers than before (CIPR State of the Profession Report, 2016).

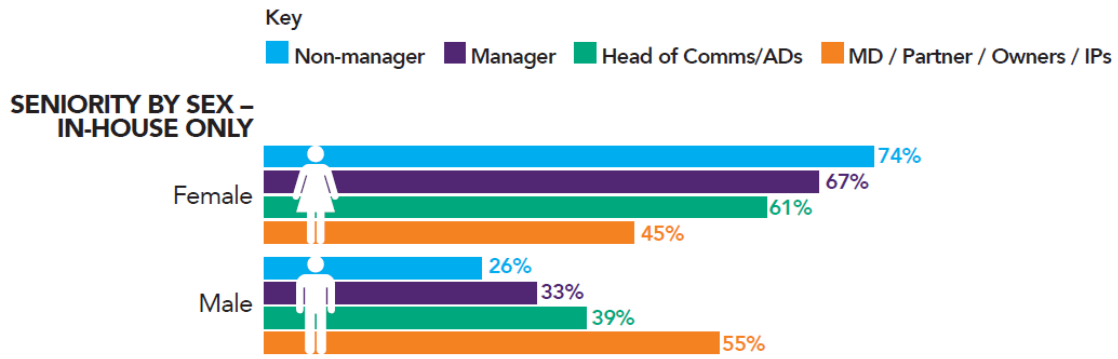
One of the central questions in current debates in Public Relations is the question of power in organisations in regards to managerial positions. The question asked is who has the power, and many research studies confirmed it is men who have the power when it comes to management while women seem to be powerless (Verhoeven & Arts 2010; Grunig et al 2001; Aldoory & Toth 2002). In this context saying that women are powerless means that female PR practitioners are continually dealing with glass ceiling, lower pay, lack of employee support, power in organisation and inclusion in business networks (Place, 2012).

Liberal feminism argues that gender system should be minimised, and that there are unequal distributions of gender roles. This then leads to activism to change the existing social structures to ensure gender equality (Rakow & Nastasia 2009; Verhoeven & Aarts 2010). The fundamental premise of liberal feminism is that “all women and men should be considered full individuals, capable of making rational decisions; a special focus should be placed upon opportunities for women to increase social and political participation only because women have not been treated as full individuals for a long time, and only until this advantage for women is overcome” (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009, p. 254). In a nutshell, liberal feminism asserts that gender system should be minimised, women should be seen as rational individual human beings in the same way as men, there is a need for reform of the distribution of power between men and women by distributing roles, women have been discriminated throughout history and the social change must come within existing social structures (ibid, p. 256).

Numerous studies demonstrated inequality of women in the industry in general and in public relations in particular. The first report on the situation in public relations starting from liberal feminist perspective was *The Velvet Ghetto report* (Cline et al, 1986), which warned that the number of women in public relations increased, while there is still a gendered segregation in place when it comes to getting into managerial and non-managerial roles, or a glass ceiling problem. Liberal feminists have generally rejected differences in treatment among men and women in PR and have been arguing women must be able to compete for same positions and same salaries with men (Aldoory & Toth 2002; Toth & Grunig 1993; Grunig 1988; Rakow & Nastasia 2009).

When it comes to glass ceiling and the wage gap, the situation depends from country to country, however, it seems that discrepancy in terms of how much are women and men paid is not decreasing. For example, in the UK female PR practitioners managed to achieve progress and now do have a presence on managerial roles, however, at the same time they are paid less than men on same positions (CIPR State of the Profession Report, 2016). While women managed to increase their numbers in managerial positions and now total to 67% of managers, and 61% of heads of communications (figure 1), men are still paid significantly more in all positions, which brings to the total difference in pay of £42,976 versus £58,015 in favour of men (figure 2).

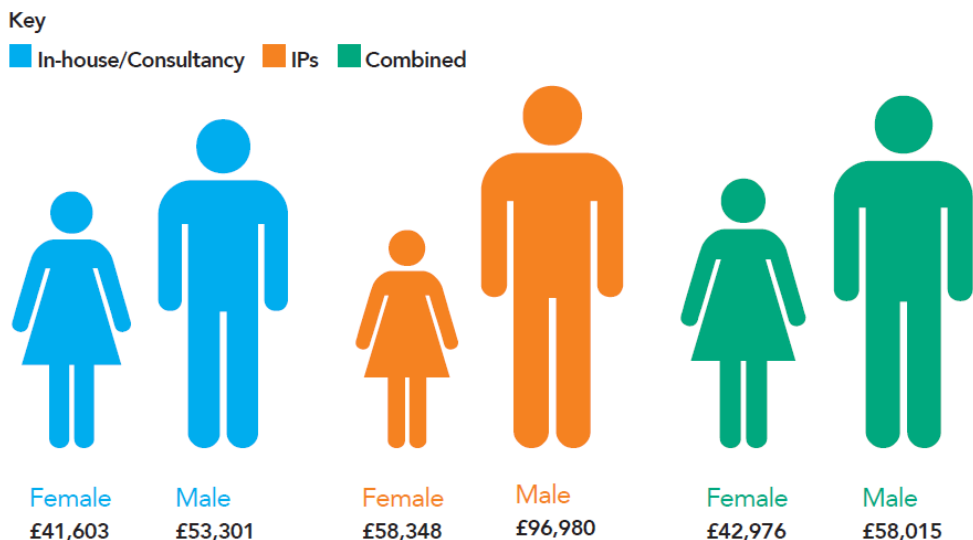
Figure 1: Senior positions per gender (UK)



Source: CIPR State of the Profession Report (2016)

Figure 2: The PR pay gap (UK)

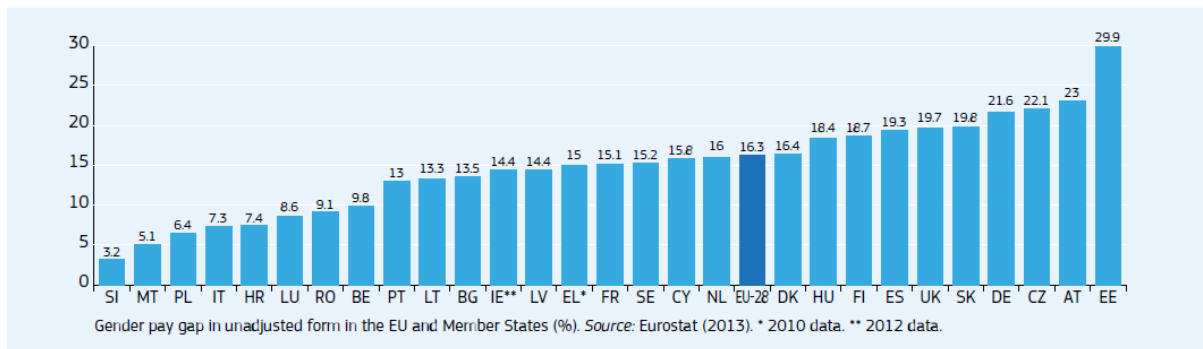
THE PR GENDER PAY GAP



Source: CIPR State of the Profession Report (2016)

This data is relevant because the UK is among top 10 countries in the world when it comes to women’s rights (YouGov, 2015), however, even such a country that gives more rights to women is still not freed from differences and inequality. On a European level, there is data available for the European Union according to which there are “three types of disadvantages women face: lower hourly earnings; working fewer hours in paid jobs; and lower employment rates (for example when interrupting a career to take care of children or relatives) (European Commission, 2015). For example, gender pay gap in the EU as a whole totals to 41.1% and the lowest pay gap is recorded in Slovenia (3.2%) while the highest one is recorded in Estonia (29.9%) (figure 3). The economically most developed countries of the EU such as UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands are somewhere in between but tending towards larger pay gap.

Figure 3: Gender pay gap in the EU



Source: European Commission (2015)

When we look at this broader picture on an EU level, we do need to ask how far has feminism got? Liberal feminism has been criticised by radical feminists for taking a uniformed stance and discussing women’s position as unified “assuming that white experience could speak for that of all women” (Humm, 1995, p. 25). In that sense, radical feminists also criticised liberal feminists for differentiating men from women and considering patriarchy as systematically embedded. Because of this, radical feminism argued that the oppression of women by men must be seen as the only deep and extensive oppression (Jaggar & Rothenberg 1994; Daymon & Demetrious 2010; Rakow & Nastasia 2009). Radical feminism centres majority of its discussions on patriarchy as a continuous oppression against women from the side of men, and they see the need to replace the current social system because it requires a change rather than transformation or reforms, however, this type of feminism does not start from the premise that women and men are equal but that there are differences between men and women while valuing women and their contribution (Daly, 1973). Nevertheless, while radical feminism criticises liberal feminism for its promotion of gender equality rather than asking for a fundamental change of the social system, this feminism has also been criticised for promoting sisterhood of women like liberal feminism without taking into consideration diversity among women and their distinctive problems and needs (Bryson, 2003).

When it comes to already mentioned patriarchy, Millett (1969) famously defined it as a set of social rules according to which older males dominate younger males, while men generally dominate over women, and this is often visible in differences in upbringing that often cements expected roles between boys and girls that later on transforms to expected roles between men and women (Eichenbaum & Orbach 1999; Van Zoonen 2004; Tench et al 2016). Recently, it has been reported that women are also more successful in getting flexible hours approved because of family duties than men, which again shows the power of patriarchy and the expected roles where women are expected to stay at home and take care of their families while men who want to do the same are denied this right, as it is apparently not perceived that men should stay at home with family (Teasdale, 2013).

In sum, it can be argued that both liberal and radical feminism are similar in a sense they both advocate the same unity of women just that they envisage different methods on how this is to be achieved. Since liberal feminism can be considered as a more practical approach that does not require some sort of revolution to make social changes, we decided to use the approach of liberal feminism in our paper while accepting the view of radical feminism that women are

historically oppressed with the patriarchy that still exists even in the most advanced western societies.

Method

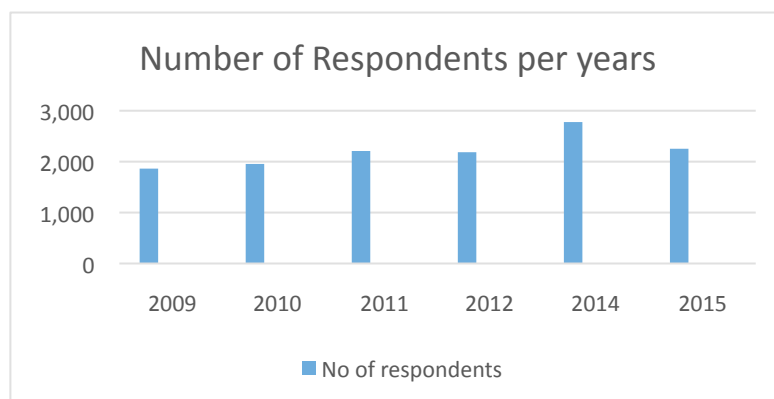
The European Communications Monitor is the largest survey that systematically monitors trends in the Public Relations industry and views of practitioners on the field in Europe. The questions are always based on the scholarly literature and trends in the communications industry. The participants are recruited via personal invitations sent to professionals throughout Europe via e-mail. The contacts of PR practitioners are collected from the database provided by EACD and additional invitations to participate via national branch associations and networks (partly self-recruiting) are also sent.

The research has been conducted since 2007, and the gender issues have been included in questionnaires since 2009. In that, the PR practitioners are asked to report on issues in the field, predict future development of the field, as well as to report on difficulties and inequality between male and female practitioners should they believe that inequality exists.

As we will present below, practitioners reported on gender inequality in all years except 2013 where no gender problems has been recorded. The issue mostly concerns the wage gap, glass ceiling as well as mentoring opportunities, which represents a new interest of practitioners that influences career progress and that, according to the results, brought to new inequality among men and women.

Speaking in terms of number of participants in each research, the project always attracts thousands of responses from across Europe, reaching its peak in 2014 and remaining high in 2015 (table 1).

Table 1. Number of respondents per years



The theoretical premise of the paper is liberal feminism advocating equality between genders in PR. However, the paper also embraces view of radical feminism according to which women are systematically and historically unequal to men, and this is seen in the fact that even though it is more women who work in PR there is still no equality in terms of salaries and career progress. Nevertheless, when the effects of liberal feminism influenced the social system and rights between genders evened, then new forms of inequality emerged such as mentoring.

Since data from the EU shows that post-Communist countries are not necessarily bringing the whole situation down even if they are often considered patriarchal (e.g. with Slovenia, Poland and Croatia being among top five EU member states when it comes to lowest pay gaps in the EU), our research that implements different methodology than surveys by Eurostat used in compiling data for the European Commission, presents a valuable addition because it goes into more depth and shows that not only is the pay gap that presents the problem in terms of equality between men and women, but that inequality is taking new forms.

Results

As results below show, the preoccupation of all European gender-related concerns is centred on inequality in salaries among male and female professionals, as well as career progress and leadership appointments. While progress in certain areas has been made albeit inequality has not been fully resolved, it seems that the inequality is spilling over to new areas. In other words, while inequality in salaries remains an issue throughout years of conducting this research, new issues emerge and demonstrate continuation of inequality.

For example, in 2009 it was reported that higher positions are still male-dominated, i.e. women were not heading communication agencies, having leadership positions and consulting positions as much as men (table 1), and the salaries of female practitioners were lower than those of male colleagues (table 2). This is in line with feminist criticism of the position of women in the society, and business and PR in general and where women are systematically paid less for the same position and face glass ceiling as already emphasised.

Table 1. Gender differences in higher positions in PR Industry in 2009

Gender: Within the whole sample, women and men are equally divided – but higher positions are still male-dominated



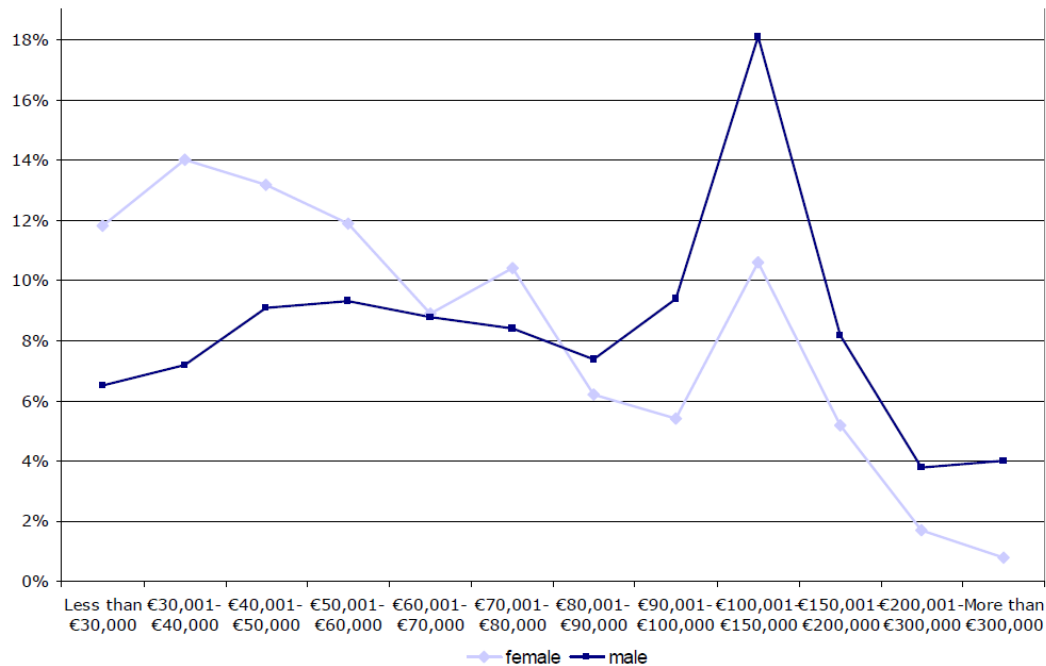
Position				
Female	50.7%	All respondents	49.3%	Male
	45.8%	Head of communication, Agency CEO	54.2%	
	55.2%	Responsible for a single communication discipline / Unit leader	44.8%	
	58.1%	Team member, Consultant	41.9%	

Table 2. Annual salaries and the gender difference in 2009

Annual salaries of male and female PR practitioners



On the other hand, in 2010, results revealed that annual salaries of male and female PR practitioners have remained a problem (table 3) but the results also revealed another inequality, i.e. it is not only that women and men do not earn the same, or that women cannot progress to higher positions. The results also revealed that once women do manage to progress to higher positions they then earn less again (table 4), which presents a continued inequality. In other words, once women manage to clear one inequality they face another, i.e. once women manage to get into position after facing inequality for longer periods then they have to fight for the same pay. The same pay seems to be the stronghold of inequality, and the most difficult issue to overcome.

Table 3. Annual salaries and the gender difference in 2010

Annual salaries of female and male PR practitioners

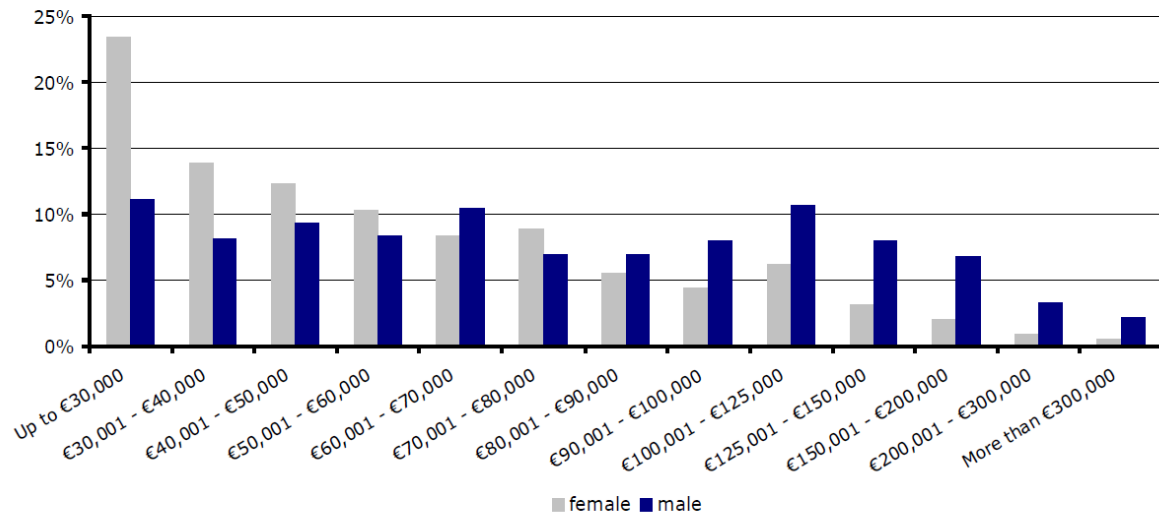


Table 4. Salaries on high positions and the gender gap in 2010

Annual salaries of women and men in different hierarchical positions

	Average salary (Median)	
	Female	Male
Head of Communication, Agency CEO	€60,001 - €70,000	€90,001 - €100,000
Unit Leader	€40,001 - €50,000	€60,001 - €70,000
Team member	€30,001 - €40,000	€40,001 - €50,000

As the PR is an industry that continually changes, the roles and expectations change continually too. That is why, in 2011, results revealed that there is still an inequality with the salaries among male and female PR practitioners (table 5), however, the issue of influence in departments and the ability to initiate changes emerged and PR practitioners reported they have a lower influence in their departments, and particularly when it comes to executive influence (table 6).

Table 5. Annual Salaries and the gender difference in 2011

Annual salaries of female and male practitioners

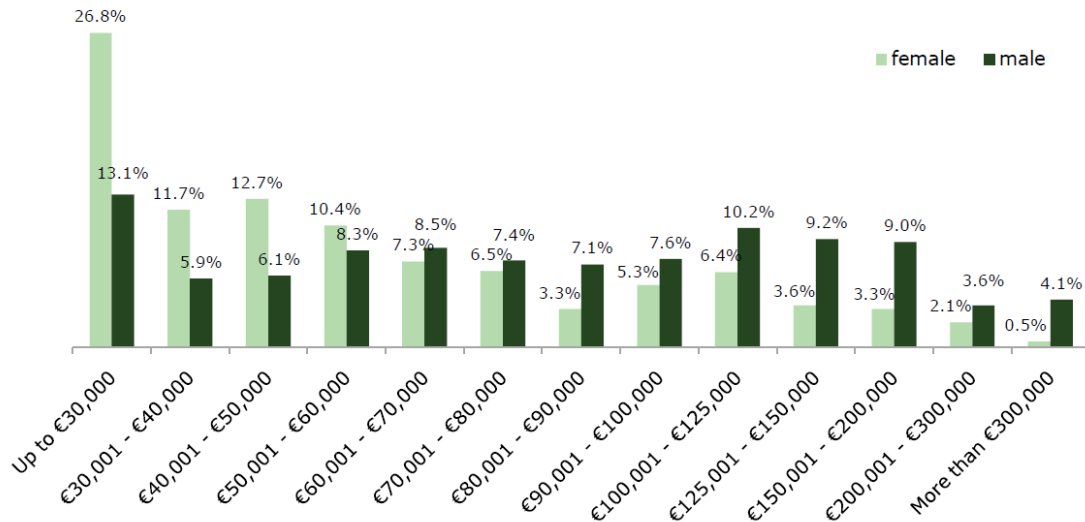


Table 6. Perceived influence in departments (2012)

Female practitioners perceive a lower influence of communication departments than their male counterparts



However, with all bad results the year 2013 did not reveal any gender concerns, which was confirmed in 2014 when female professionals reported better career opportunities while at the same time stating that males have higher status and job security (table 7).

Table 7. Increase in Career opportunities in 2014

Female professionals report better career opportunities,
while male communicators enjoy higher status and job security

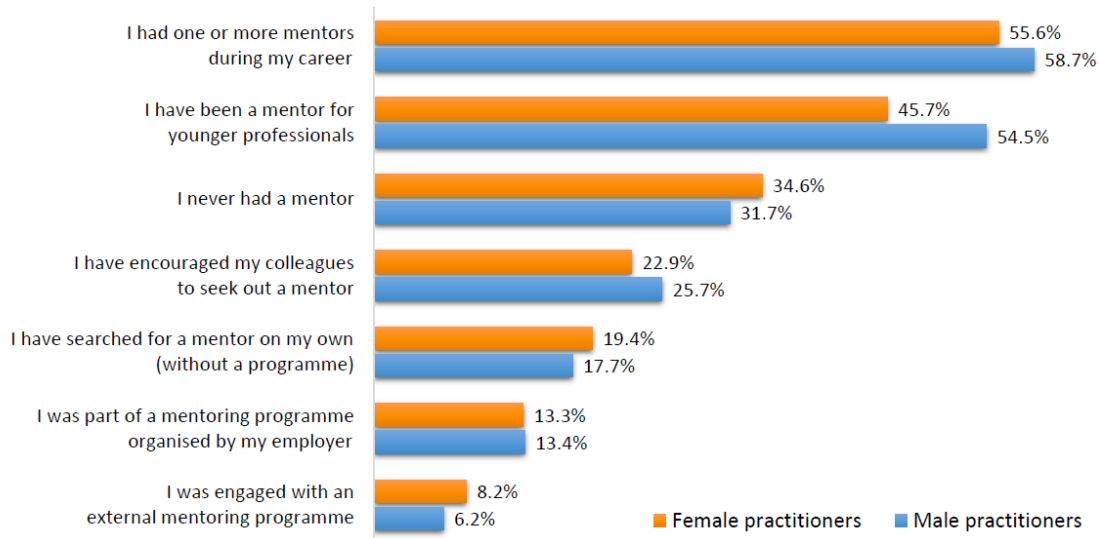
	Female	Male	Overall
My tasks are interesting and manifold	77.2%	77.5%	77.3%
The job has a high status **	46.4%	53.0%	48.9%
My work-life balance is all right *	36.2%	36.4%	36.3%
The salary is adequate	37.0%	38.6%	37.6%
I have great career opportunities **	36.7%	35.2%	36.1%
My job is secure and stable *	46.1%	47.0%	46.4%
Superiors and (internal) clients value my work	65.9%	68.0%	66.7%
Overall, I am satisfied with my job	65.2%	68.6%	66.5%

But, 2014 revealed that inequality of women with men in Public Relations has another face, and that is mentoring. Mentoring new colleagues is becoming part of the recruitment process for leadership positions and all senior roles not just in PR but also elsewhere. Even higher positions in academia now require leadership roles, which then encompasses mentoring of younger colleagues. In 2014, the results there showed that women not only mentor other colleagues in lower numbers, but have also not been mentored themselves, which certainly can bring barriers in career progress and future mentorship appointments (table 8).

Table 8. Inequality in mentoring among male and female practitioners

Female communicators have been less involved in mentoring

Experiences of communication professionals



In addition, men earn more than female professionals on the same hierarchical level (table 9 and 10).

Table 9. Differences in salaries and the gender gap (2014)

Men earn more than female professionals on the same hierarchical level

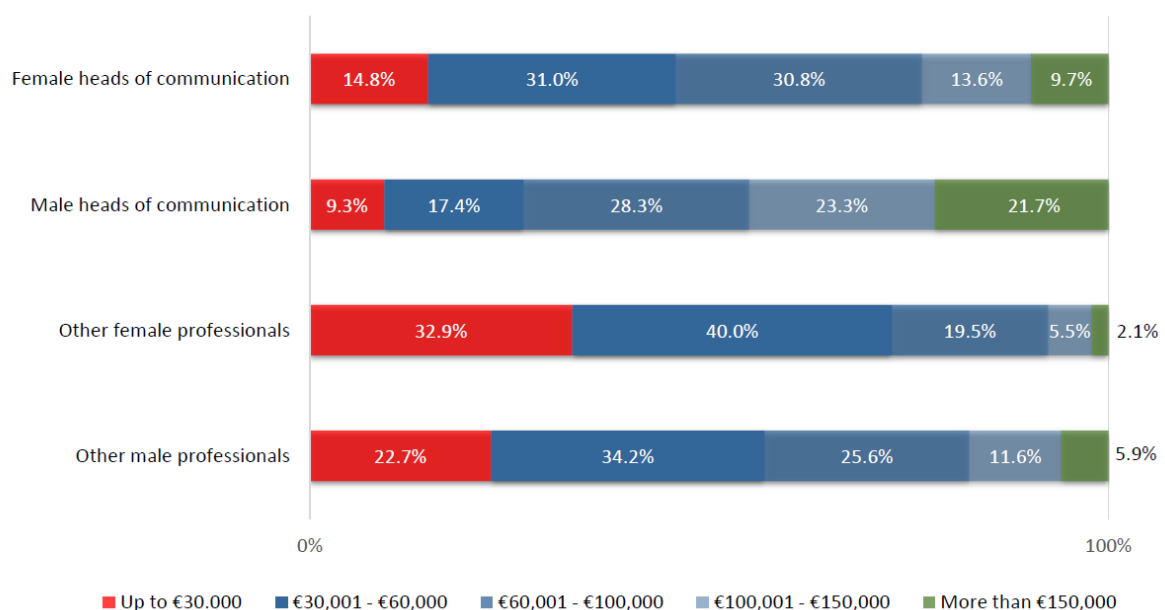
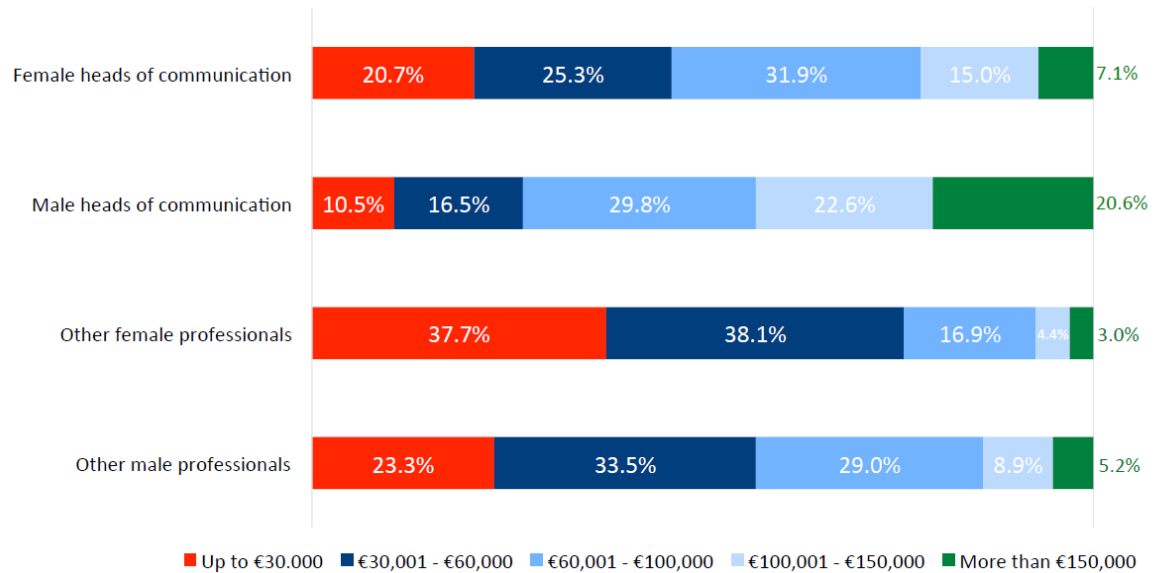


Table 10. Differences in salaries and the gender gap (2015)

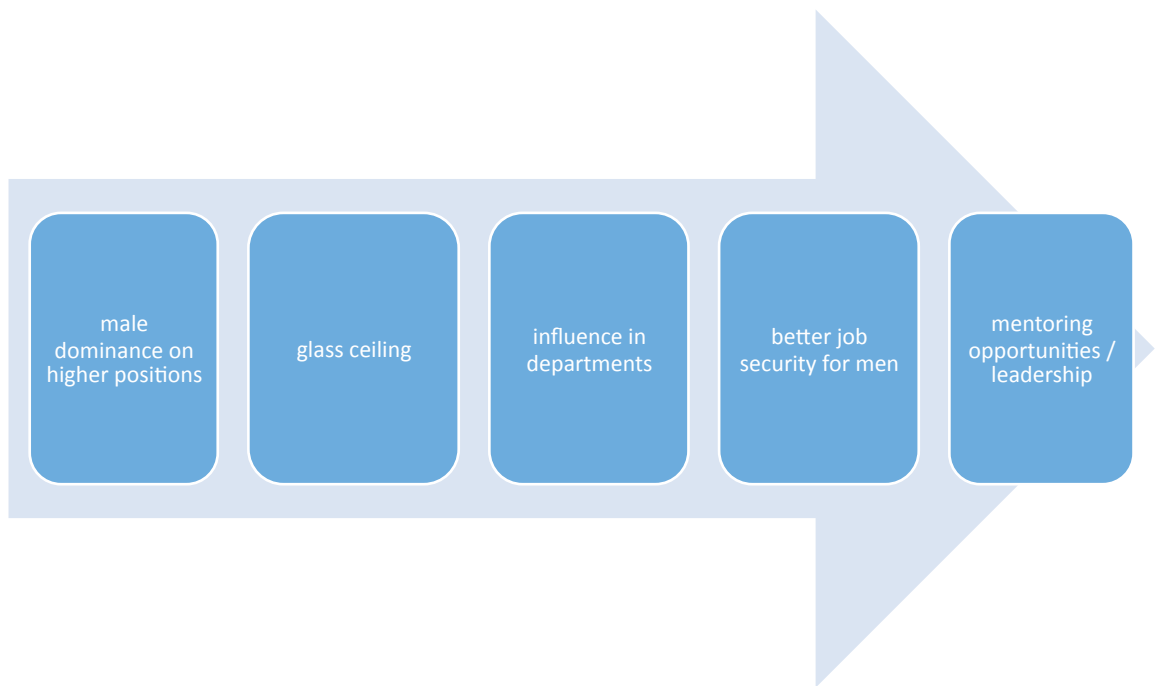
Men earn more than female professionals on the same hierarchical level



In summary, main concerns are systematically reported when it comes to salaries where there is a consistent gender gap, however, the inequality is showing its other face and demonstrates itself in new areas relevant for career progress such as mentoring, influence and increased opportunities for female PR practitioners. In other words, in five out of six years analysed here the wage gap emerged as an issue accompanied with other issues emerging as the industry progresses and transforms.

As per figure 4 the nature of inequality systematically changes (except the wage gap that remains a constant problem), and once women achieve equality in one field then new inequality emerges.

Figure 4: The changing nature of inequality



Conclusion

As it has been argued in this paper and in vast majority of available academic work, PR is a gender profession with female practitioners forming majority of the workforce in majority of countries, however, female practitioners are systematically facing inequality whether because of the wage gap (a constant issue), glass ceiling, lack of influence in departments, less job security or lack of leadership and mentoring opportunities. While there are differences between countries, each country has a problem in this way or the other. For example, the UK scores high on the list of EU countries with wage gap problem but at the same time it is world's 10th country when it comes to women's rights in general.

The only certainty in these debates is that patriarchy is alive and well but to what extent have women achieved equality it is not an easy question to answer. While some progress has certainly been made, at least on the European level as our results and other academic debate testify, there is still more to be achieved. It seems as if inequality continues and transforms to new areas as and when they arise. This brings to the fundamental requirement of liberal feminism to improve the system from within and demands to equalise women's positions in all aspects of the society. Given the fact inequality constantly changes its face, questions from radical feminists to change and replace the system as such also seem justified albeit not reasonable in terms of the ability to achieve that goal especially given the fact feminism because a label with negative connotation.

Liberal feminists must turn towards achieving equality within the current social structure and continue to resolving issues as and when they arise. However, in order to achieve the ultimate equality between men and women, liberal feminists will have to tackle patriarchy and its rules and turn to men who do not want to conform to expected roles and yet are forced by the society. The quoted example with family leaves approved more to women than men shows to what extent patriarchy is embedded in societies, and this is where the problem must be tackled, i.e. achieving equality for both women who do not want to be placed on an expected position but also for men who also do not want socially expected positions, who want to stay at home and take care of family.

However, to answer the question of this paper, how far have we got, it is safe to say far but not far enough. As one issue is resolved, and it is good that issues can be tackled, new issue arises and the social structure is still based on inequality among genders.

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