



GENDER APPROACH TO VIRTUAL TEAMS MANAGEMENT

Marina Zucca, University of Padova, Italy

Shagufta Ashraf, HoD Banking and Finance, University of Kotli Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Shabana Nawaz Khan, PhD Scholar, Department of Public Administration, University of Kotli Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Dr. Muhammad Mudassar Khan, HoD Management Sciences, Abbottabad University of Science and Technology, Pakistan

Farhat Qayum, PhD Scholar, Department of Public Administration, University of Kotli Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Abstract: This paper will analyse the gender approach applied to the growing use of virtual teams by public and private organizations. Working remotely gives many advantages; such those related to diversity, employing people who do not wish to move to other Countries, reduce office costs and so on. Starting from how many women have experienced remote working during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic, the aim of this literature review is to explore how virtual teams can address the issue of gender gaps. From a first overview, it seemed that smart work enhanced women's levels of stress, not being helpful in the conciliation of familiar and working life. However, studies have shown that women have those personal characteristics considered the best ones in order to manage and being the leader of a virtual team. It has been demonstrated that women's approach and style of communication can encourage team members to work as a unique group, where every single employee is needed in order to get the best result, while having a specific role. Moreover, researches have outlined the strategic importance of training people before asking them to join a virtual team, so to understand the use of new technologies, but also colleagues' needs, backgrounds, culture and giving value to each one's diversity. We will see how caring about gender approach while managing human resources in a virtual context can also be a tool for achieving and implementing *Sustainable Development Goal* n.5, "gender equality", which is undoubtedly related to quality of working life and other issues connected with job and management of family and house duties.

Keywords: virtual teams, human resources management, gender approach, gender empowerment, leadership.

I. INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, public and private organizations and firms were not supposed to allow their employees to work from home or whatever other place they might have found comfortable. Nowadays, it is possible to work remotely. Technology and internet have enabled people to work with colleagues never seen before. Virtual teams are groups of employees, working for the same organization, trying to get the same goal, while living in different locations and using internet and new technologies as the main tools of their job.

While researchers have found that virtual teams have many positive outcomes, they also impose many challenges. They widen recruiting horizons, so that HR managers are able to find the person they are looking for and employ her/him, despite the geographical distance. Moreover, virtual teams are intrinsically "diversity carriers" and it gives many advantages to the group and the organization too, if teams are appropriately managed. It will be seen that characteristics of personality are very important, not only for the employees, but also for those who have to manage them. At this regard, studies have shown that leaders managing virtual teams should be flexible, emphatic, and able to listen and understand each one's point of view and create a climate of inclusion and cohesion. Leadership should not be vertical and hierarchical. Instead, leaders should encourage each team member to become a leader. This literature review takes into account two practical points.

The first one is the spread of smart working due to Covid-19 pandemic and the stress and discomfort it created. The second point is that women need to be trained and to have a well-scheduled time of work. In fact, if in the one hand, virtual teams might be the right solutions for many people, for others they might turn into a very stressful solution. The consequences of large use of smart working during the pandemic bring us to our second focal point: gender gap and the improvement of 5th *Sustainable Development Goal*.

United Nations have required cohesion from each part of the society in order to increase the number of working women, also at the top of organizations.

If working from home have increased women stress, anxiety and gender inequalities during the pandemic, does it mean that virtual working is not for women? Not. The characteristics required for being a true leader and manager of a virtual teams are largely more verifiable in women than men.

Furthermore, recruiting and training women in a properly might be the chance to give them more flexibility. Creating working environments more flexible might be a way for getting gender equality.

In conclusion, it will be suggested to organizations to experiment diversity in virtual teams and let women manage them. In fact, on the basis of their own nature, women have all these characteristics necessary to make possible that a leader can build a circular and successful team.

Smart Work and Gender Gaps

Due to covid-19 pandemic, many organizations have largely deployed flexible work practices that might have counterbalancing effects on domestic labor. By the moment that telecommunicating carried out mostly within a domestic context, it might exacerbate gender inequality and disproportionately increase time spent in childcare and housework and stress job-related of both parents.

Since March 2020, the demand of working flexibility has increased and, in a certain way, it has intensified mothers' rate of house working. Flexibility has been seen as a possible key for reducing gender inequality and improving women's life. However, evidences show that telecommunicating or smart working have limited effects in addressing gender inequality, when they do not have activities and working time well scheduled. For sure, it has been demonstrated that they address job satisfaction, but they also increases working hours, in comparison to low wages. If, in the one hand, family-related conflicts disproportionately affect both parents, given their time spent in care work, on the other, women generally seemed to be more willing to accept a lower wage, in order to work from home. Previous to the Covid-19 pandemic, women aimed to work from home with the hope to better manage their private lives, while maintaining their economic independence. However, we should analyse both positive and negative effects that smart work has had on women.

Actually, technologies are making possible for them to conciliate maternity and employment. Thanks to telecommunication, women are now enrolled in higher position and there is a growing number of women founders and cofounders, CEO and leaders of companies working both locally and globally. However, this kind of practises might increase the already existing gender gaps at the basis of domestic labor and patriarchal societies. Studies about consequences of technology and virtual working on women's life displayed many factors that might create negative outcomes. For example, working from home reduces spatial distance between office and family. Whilst it creates an advantage, it also leads women to translate time saved from work to child and house care, whereas this usually does not happen in the cases of men. Furthermore, even if women are multitasking in their responsibilities, they might be more affected by interruption than fathers, while working at home. This is demonstrated by the domains of time and the stuff women have to do in relation to their role within the family. Interruptions during working hours can also exacerbate tensions about the role switching and careers.

This last evidence and others have been explained in the report of Thomas Lyttelton, Emma Zang, KellyMusick, which balances the consequences of smart working in periods before and after covid-19. This American study has investigated the disproportionate gender impact on flexibility and family work due to smart working, comparing data from the 2003-2018 American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and the April and May 2020 COVID Impact Survey. Despite the many and largely discussed advantages of virtual teams and smart working, they both have negative aspects. In the first survey, women seemed to be inclined to work from home, with the hope to manage better both family and work.

At this regard, the study suggests that, prior to Covid-19 pandemic, people who choose to work at home, generally, preferred to work part time, had a higher socioeconomic status, were white men, more likely to work longer hours and married with a full-time worker. On the other hand, mothers reported more part-time virtual work and lower earnings; they had also reported higher shares in professional jobs than men had. Prior to Covid, more black mothers used telecommunication than white ones. Mothers also reported fewer hours of telework per day than fathers did. The ATUS modules from 2010, 2012 and 2013 allowed the analysis of perceived wellbeing of parents in smart working, with a comparison with parents not using telecommunication in their jobs. The first group resulted to be more tired and stressed than parents in the second one. Neither men's nor women's wellbeing varied substantially. Moreover, mothers reported to be more tired and stressed than fathers in the workplace, although differences related to gender gaps linked to wellbeing were not significant. Thus, ATUS research found little evidence about the smart working improvements on wellbeing.

Going further with the research, authors have studied the effects of smart working on gender balance during Covid-19 pandemic. Since March-April 2020, respondents had a high status and jobs, but they were more racially and ethnically diverse than those in the pre-Covid-19 sample. It also evidenced gender inequalities during the pandemic. It highlighted negative pandemic effects on unemployment and subjective wellbeing for both men and women. Women experienced negative effects while working at home more frequently than men, mostly during the first week of telecommunication.

Statistically, it appeared that gender gaps were larger among those women working at home than those in the workplace. In fact, mothers reported important level of lower wellbeing while working through telecommunication.

In conclusion, the research established that telecommunicating increased time spent in childcare of both parents. Mothers have been found to do more housework while working from home than fathers did and, in general, gender gaps and disparities mostly affected women's wellbeing and productivity. Furthermore, during the lockdown, mothers suffered more anxiety, loneliness and depression than their male counterpart. Pandemic made smart working responses gendered, given that it exacerbated the already existing gender inequalities, had negative consequences on women's productivity and severely influenced their wellbeing. The reasons behind this last sentence have to be found in the domestic division of labor and labor market. Moreover, women have directly invested time saved from work in house and family care. Thus, pandemic and smart working did not make women's lives easier, instead they increased gender gaps. Of course, the reason should be found in a lack of training before turning the work of women from face-to-face to remote.

Diversity: How Social Differences Affect Gender Empowerment

Between the many social differences, gender-based ones are deemed as an important element in telecommunication and work environments. A smaller number of women have studied or have jobs in the sector of computer sciences or engineering. There are clear differences in the male and female use of technology related to smart work or teleworking. When dealing with the use of technology for studying or working, women reported to have contributed less frequently, not receiving a positive feedback and not appealing to the same sources of support. Similarly, another study showed gender differences at the level of motivation, flexibility and confidence. Men were more confident in enjoying and using online and technological tools, whilst women reported to have more problems. Explanations might be that women do not have the same computer skills that men have and that they do work in environments not compatible with their needs. Moreover, women generally have positive attitudes and are more collaborative than men while working in virtual teams. Women also tend to have a more socio-emotional and non-aggressive behaviour. Instead, men usually have aggressive attitudes, supporting their opinion in a stronger manner. Moreover, they are not as comfortable as women are with team evaluation. Analysis of computer mediated dialogue showed variations related to gender. Women used to frequently apologies, questions, personal orientation and support, whilst men tend to the self-promotion, used sarcasm and strong assertions. Mixed groups had more variables outcomes than single-gender based ones, where women demonstrated to have higher averages of results.

Gender issue is a matter of inclusion that suggest equally profiling men and women when recruiting and building a virtual team, given all the above-mentioned characteristics. We will see how virtual teams can be affected by traditional gender-based roles. In fact, gender does not only affect virtual work with different behaviours, but it can also play a strategic part within everyday life. This last point is particularly relevant now that women are getting more and more roles in managerial sectors and have to conciliate working and private life. Moreover, if during the last decades, virtual environments were seen as the turning points for this kind of conciliation and a great challenge for saving time and improve mental wellness, reducing stress work-correlated, pandemic has shown that these previsions were not so true.

Trust, Effectiveness and Gender Approach

As previously notice, virtual teams work better when employees trust each other. Trust has been defined as *"the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party"*. If there is trust between parties, they will make a jointly and honest effort in order to get their shared goals. Employees who do not trust their fellows are more likely to control many times others' work, increasing, in a certain way, the amount of time needed to complete a project. In virtual teams, trust is important for increasing confidence within the same group, promoting open exchange of information and holding the team together.

Moreover, employees who have trust in their fellows are more satisfied of their experience and work. The absence of face-to-face contact might affect the development of trust within virtual teams, due to the difficulties related to telecommunication and technological interactions. It might seem unreal, but telecommunication differences among women and men can influence trust within virtual teams. Differences in this sense have been demonstrated by many researches. When working in team, women's style of communication aims at gaining trust developing consensus, and establishing relationships with others. On the other hand, men tend to be more task-oriented: in this case, the goal is to win the discussion, whilst women tend to understand their work colleagues' perspectives. Given this difference, women's initial assumptions of trust in virtual teams may be greater than men's. For women, building positive and good trust relationships seems to be not only possible but also preferable, while men do not give the same attention and importance to this aspect. Higher levels of trust are reported by women working in virtual teams, whilst men tend to accomplish their goals, instead of working on group faith. Men are more likely to use conversation as a way for gaining information and establishing dominance in relationships, even if in the asynchronous method of virtual teams, it might become more difficult to interrupt or to force a certain conversation. In this context, telecommunication and smart working can have an equalizing effect on relationships. However, studies have shown that women reported higher levels of trust in short-duration virtual teams and that employees have high rates of trust for members of their own demographic group, thus gender composition within teams might be important. Many studies suggested that job satisfaction is higher for those employees who are working in homogeneous gender groups, while group cohesion was lower in gender mixed groups. In 1998, K. Y. Williams and O'Reilly, in a review of 40 years of research, demonstrated that groups' performance was negatively impacted by the heterogeneous gender composition. In gender heterogeneous and gender-homogeneous teams, levels of satisfaction and trust were not so different, whilst the all-female teams completed projects in a quicker and better manner. There is another evidence in this research to be analysed. Men, when attempting to express their dominance, found it difficult to use virtual communication, thus many of them have been reported to withdraw from the groups. Within teams, alternatives and strength are driven from their diversity. Within virtual teams, typical male patterns of communication are less effective, due to the asynchronous method, which makes difficult for men to establish their dominance. Instead, asynchronous communications can lead women to participate and express their ideas more easily.

A study conducted by K. Furumo and J.M. Pearson has finally demonstrated that women are more influential in the communication within virtual teams than men are in establishing their domination. This research has shown that technology communication might be a tool for balancing communication and roles within teams, giving value to diversity and strengthening its outcomes. It also recognized that women actually enjoy working in virtual teams, more than men do. In a certain way, smart working and virtual teams can have an equalizing effect, by the moment that it is more difficult to interrupt communication to impose and impose one view.

The research, related to the short-term,

We will see how smart working has pervaded everyday working life due to break out of Covid-19 pandemic. Many researches and people used – and still do – to see it as a way of improving women's life and wellbeing, a tool for grating them more free time, a way to better manage their numerous duties and fill the gender gap, in relation to working issues. Did virtual teams help empowering women? Is it a viable road for improving women wellbeing and conciliation between career and family care?

Women Leadership in Virtual Teams

Within a virtual work environment, leadership is a crucial characteristic for the management of both teams and personal tasks and roles. Diversity and heterogeneity have been found as values and positive qualities of virtual teams, even when people have never met each other. Most of the time, women represent a minority group, In the big sea of diversities that people might represent, women are a minority group. We are well aware about the fact that, even today, women struggle to get an equal pay and treatment at work. However, more and more women fill important roles within organizations, becoming true leaders. Generally, women are more likely to facilitate cooperative learning, communication and cohesion within a group, being also more relational than men. They tend to make all the members converge around the group, greatly influencing and controlling it. Leaders' behaviours shape group relationships quality between team members. Given that women build themselves as relational, teams held by women have more cohesion and people develop closer personal and professional relations. They seek to establish more positive and frequently interactions, influencing their attitudes and will to stay in the team, thanks to the affect and energy that they generate as leaders. Team cohesion is a crucial point, mostly in virtual teams, and concerns both group's tasks and social dimension. Bollen and Hoyle have defined cohesion as "*an individual's sense of belonging to a particular group and his*

or her feelings of morale associated with membership in the group". Women are more likely to act in this way, making their colleagues develop this feeling of being part of a team. Moreover, leaders who are *self-construal* are also more motivated to emphasize cooperation and cohesion within the team. In fact, studies have shown that individuals self-construal tend to pay attention to how information is spread, knowing that their outcomes are intertwined with those of the group. When employees work interdependently, they are also more likely to achieve group goals by having cooperative behaviors. The study of Janz and Prasarnphanich about cooperative learning proved that it is composed of positive interdependent members, creating promotive interactions, based on the assumption that the single team cannot be successful, until every single member is not successful too. Thus, by the moment that women are prone to construe themselves as relational, they are more likely to use participative communication, characterized by transparency, participation, mindfulness and inputs aimed at empowering every component of the group. Moreover, other studies have shown that self-construal people tend to avoid hurting hearers' feelings, promoting mindfulness conversation, paying attention to others' points of view, giving more attention to the needs of others during decision processes and behave more inclusively. Therefore, leaders with self-construal personalities easily stimulate participative communication while working, requesting others' opinions and promoting information sharing. In conclusion, given that women are more likely to be relational and leaders with this characteristic tend to be more cooperative and stimulate participative communication, teams lead by women are expected to report higher values of cohesion.

Recommendations: Women Leadership as an Advantage in Virtual Teams

This literature review can have its application in everyday life and might be helpful for HR practitioner, when dealing with the issue of gender equality. As the studies showed women are might have a precise role within virtual teams.

When managing teams of employees, leadership is crucial. Teams require to be coordinated by high qualified professionals. Generally, teams requesting high coordination have these three characteristics: *functional diversity, size, and geographic dispersion.*

Due to the diverse backgrounds of members, functional diversity might lead people to misunderstand the messages and there might be a lack of adequate responses and behaviours, while working on the same goal. It might also be an impediment for the development of working cohesion. Moreover, in teams where people have different skills and roles, members might develop stronger relationships with those persons having similar functions. Team size and geographical dispersion need to be highly coordinated too, due to the difficulties related to communication and trust. In a study of Lehigh University, it has been demonstrated that women, leading this kind of teams, are more likely to foster cohesion, cooperative learning, and participative communication and to gain success in their efforts. Women tend to be more relational and relational leaders might help in the creation of a unique asset where members work interdependently. By creating trust and enforcing the communication with the teams, women leaders rise a sense of responsibility and cohesion. Women appeared to be more likely to have a relational approach to leadership. When leaders demonstrate empathy, values and effective concern for the others, they increase cohesion and team norms. Furthermore, leaders with these characteristics might lead to have better team relationships and participative interactions, lowering inter-personal aggression and encouraging collaboration. To sum up, when team members have different functions, size and are geographically disperse, as in the case of virtual teams, women leaders could be the best ones to manage them, which is why this approach is strongly recommended. The research of Lehigh University has demonstrated that, when dealing with this kind of teams, female leadership is an advantage, for the way through which women build team relationships and interaction norms.

As team coordination requirements increase, groups managed by women reported more cohesion and participative communication than those led by men. In fact, women leaders, are more likely, on average, to have a relational self-construal and to successfully coordinate challenges of functionally diverse teams, larger teams, and teams with dispersed members. The cited study has shown the results from the analysis of 82 innovation teams, led by women and men. It demonstrated that as functional diversity increased, teams managed by women reported more cohesion than those led by men. More cohesion, cooperative learning and participation have been reported in teams led by women, as size increased. Higher levels of cooperation have been rated by those geographically dispersed teams led by women, then men.

On the basis of what analysed until this point, it is clear that nowadays virtual teams should be led by women, in order to guarantee a better working environment, where employees are prone to develop better relationships, with a better exchange of information and greatly achieving goals. Last, but yes important is the training they should have. Working in virtual teams should be done after a great analysis of each member's needs and after having trained her/him about the role, position, tools, timeline goals

and colleagues' backgrounds, role and tasks.

II. CONCLUSION

Virtual teams are increasing their presence in private and public sector, given that we now live in a more globalized and interconnected world. At the same time, they can be an effective tool in addressing social challenges, such as gender equality and the increase of women working from home.

Taking into consideration the difficulties that women have in managing both family and working life, being part of a virtual team and being able to work from home should be a great advantage and might give to lots of them the chance to become economic independent.

Despite this, pandemic has demonstrated that smart working, in the cases of women not trained nor prepared for using the necessary technologies, can become a way for elevating levels of stress. However, it can also offer many positive aspects. Among the others, it can be a way for increasing working flexibility, ensuring gender equality, helping women to maintaining managerial position while work from home. In fact, women that are more self-construal, are also more likely to better manage virtual groups, people working from remote places, coordinating them, ensuring communication and making possible to build trust and solid relationships within the team. Researches have found out that, on average, women are more likely to communicate and lead a team in a more cohesive way than men: that is why women leadership is as much recommended as trainings. Selection and training of women is a crucial point: virtual teams require a previously well-studied organization a project where people are asked to work as a single unite, knowing that each one will be working alone, from their places. Virtual teams need to be well-coordinated by leaders that guide them, know their diversity and are able to build a place that evaluates all the diversities.

This study can have an effective and great application in light of the 2030 Agenda, which is asking to the whole society to create a more sustainable and justice world: it cannot be achieved without taking into account gender disparities. Virtual teams might be a great solution for these public and private organizations trying to guarantee and increment gender inclusion in the working place.

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