Women’s Attitudes to Affirmative Action Programs for Leadership

Key Concept
What effect do affirmative action programs have on women’s attitudes to leadership? According to this Idea, when female employees perceive that their organization practices gender-based affirmative action, they are less likely to desire to attain leadership positions, even though these actions are designed to increase their access to such positions.

Idea Summary
Affirmative action programs (also known as ‘positive discrimination’) are designed to ensure equal employment opportunities in organizations, taking into account factors such as race, religion, gender, etc. They can vary from quota systems to something more informal, such as preferences during selection processes. However, though they are put in place to avoid discrimination, they have not gone without their fair share of opposition; some studies have shown selection on the basis of affirmative action can result in the stigmatizing effect of it not being viewed as a merit-based selection.

In a 2011 paper, Insper’s Gazi Islam and Sarah Zilenovsky examined the effects of gender-based affirmative action programs in Latin America. The region—and Brazil in particular—has experienced a surge in the adoption of affirmative action programs in the 21st century. They highlight that such programs may carry the effect of reverse discrimination, as highly publicized cases of quotas affect cultural perceptions of discrimination.

They found that in general, women tend to judge themselves as having less leadership capacity than men; more specifically, women who believe their organization practices gender-based affirmative action feel less desire to attain leadership positions. However, they also found that women who perceive affirmative action justly also assess their leadership capacity more positively and will desire a leadership position more than those who do not.

Islam and Zilenovsky’ findings may be applicable outside of Brazil too, as a 2009 report published by the Economist Intelligence Unit highlights that women’s access to leadership is most problematic in Europe and the Middle East, as well as South America.

Methodology: In order to test their hypotheses, Islam and Zilenovsky surveyed 136 managers in the Brazilian division of a large multinational consumer goods firm. Middle managers were chosen over executives because of their potential upward mobility, making their beliefs more relevant to career progress. They then measured three things: the participant affirmative action justice...
perceptions; their belief in the existence of an affirmative action program; and their leadership attitudes.

**Business Application**

In 2013, 14% of the CEOs of large companies in Brazil were women, compared to less than 5% in the UK and US; for example, the CEOs of Petrobras (Brazil's largest oil company), Blue Tree (a large hotel chain) and TAM (a leading Brazilian airline) are all female. As such, the potential negative psychological effects of gender-based affirmative action are important for organizations in the region to bear in mind, in order to avoid hampering the increasing examples of diversity there.

Islam and Zilenovsky find that mere belief in the existence of affirmative action programs is negatively related to leadership desire, so what can be done instead of such programs to ensure diversity?

One suggestion is that organizations should focus on changing their culture to make employees more receptive to differences, instead of through affirmative action alone. Asian companies, for example, were cited by the Economist Intelligence Unit as using the heterogeneity of the larger population to allow diversity to grow within the organization organically, rather than forcing it through programs.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Gazi Islam’s profile at Insper
Insper Institute for Education and Research’s profile at IEDP

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