Women’s Networks Should Combine Efforts To Campaign For Greater Equality, Research Shows

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Women’s networks charged with the common goals of securing equal pay, better gender representation, social safety and a greater sense of belonging often work alone in their efforts, missing out on the benefits of joining forces.

According to research by Erasmus Centre for Women and Organisations (ECWO) (https://www.rsm.nl/faculty-research/centres/erasmus-centre-for-women-and-organisations/) at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) (https://www.rsm.nl/), whilst such organisations voiced the desire to collaborate in order to draw greater attention to their work, the vast majority continue to operate individually.

Undertaken by ECWO’s assistant researcher Kirsten Kardijk, the study investigated the workings of Overarching Women’s Organisations or Networks operating in the Netherlands, and the relationships between them.

Overarching Women’s Organisations or Networks are described by the researchers as collectives that exist outside of a company, catering to those in a wider industry, geographical location or skillset.

As a first step, the researchers used a mix of Dutch and English keywords linked to women, organisations, and networks to identify the collectives currently operating in the Netherlands. To broaden the scope, experts in the field of women's organisations such as Marguerite Soeteman-Reijnen and Eline Kurvink evaluated the collected organisations and networks critically, to get a clear view of their economic nature, mission and vision.

From this a shortlist of 100 organisations and networks were identified and divided into seven categories: recruiting, platform, co-work, capital, network, institution, and ideology, based on each organisation’s most prevalent features. A survey was then distributed to each via email, which was followed up with phone calls.

Kirsten Kardijk says,

“What was interesting is that we found a difference, a mismatch between what we saw online and what we found in the survey. In other words, what the organisations claimed to do online and what they actually wanted to do was different.”

Despite voicing similar goals, and calling for similar actions from government, employers and wider society to help improve inclusivity for women, And despite nurturing a collective of connected individuals, the research showed that very few were able to practice what they preached at a higher level by connecting with other similar organisations.

According to the organisations and networks themselves, barriers to collaboration included a lack of transparency among them as well as the assumption that they are too different from one another.

Kirsten Kardijk continues,

“The expectation of a lack of transparency is strongly linked to the gap we found between what organisations and network state online and the answer in the questionnaire. It is a call to action, to start a conversation, as transparency is often lacking on the internet.”

A further barrier, the researchers suggest, could be due to competition. Whilst no evidence of this was recorded by the survey, previous studies conducted by the ECWO’s founder Dianne Bevelander suggests that women prefer not to work with other women in situations which require trust.

However, the researchers note that such differences can be complementary. To overcome these challenges, the study’s findings were presented at ECWO’s annual conference – an event which brings together women and men from across academia, industry, business, public sector and, specifically, women’s organisations, who are motivated to connect and drive positive change towards gender equality.

The aim is that, using the research findings, the ECWO team will be able to put measures in place to combine such collectives in order to better pursue their common goals.

ECWO’s Executive Director, Professor Hanneke Takkenberg, believes the findings could hold impact outside of the Netherlands for connecting women’s networks on a national or even international scale.

Prof. Takkenberg says,

“The theme of our annual conference this past November was (Re)Connecting (Wo)men – which echoed and broadened a core aspect of ECWO’s work and that is to connect, collaborate, support and amplify women. The research we undertook showed that women’s organisations are not yet collaborating on common challenges but they have the ambition to. We hope that, through our conference, research and work, we are able to help in the creation of a meta network for women’s organisations.”

The full report is available to be read here (https://www.rsm.nl/fileadmin/Faculty-Research/Centres/ECWO/ECWO_Research/Reconnecting_Women_16-11-2022.pdf):

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For further information, or to request an interview with Executive Director of ECWO, Professor Hanneke Takkenberg, Kirsten Kardijk or Diane Coetzer, please contact Kerry Ruffle at BlueSky Education – kerry@bluesky-pr.com / +44(0)1582 790701

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