Effective career guidance support for girls and women: the same or different?

Can the same theoretical framework for career guidance support be applied to all client groups? Should career guidance practice, for example, treat girls and women in exactly the same way as boys and men? Jenny Bimrose invites a moment of reflection on these questions.

Jenny Bimrose, Emeritus Professor, the University of Warwick, England

One of the main purposes of career guidance is to support clients in achieving their full potential. In the early years of career guidance, it was assumed that the same theories that guided practice were equally effective for all clients. More recently, this assumption has been questioned. The following article highlights the necessity to recognize the particular challenges and barriers girls and women may face in career guidance support

The realities faced by girls and women in the labour market

In both developed and developing countries, the persistent discrimination and disadvantage that women suffer in the labour market is well documented. Despite some progress, it remains a problem. Since the 1960s the Nordic countries have been known for their high level of gender equality, mainly because they have amongst the world's highest employment and education rates for women. Indeed, Norway is considered to be one of the most gender equal countries in the world. Still, a number of challenges to gender equality remain and new gender issues keep surfacing. Gender equality policies have been more or less successfully integrated into many areas, while other areas lag behind. So even where

countries, like Norway, have resorted to legislation to address the more glaring gender inequalities, like equal pay for equal work, this has not always been completely successful. s

One root cause of this inequality is occupational segregation. Compared with men, women are concentrated into a narrow range of occupational areas (like social care for children and elderly people, nursing, clerical, catering, retail and cleaning), across all nations of the world. These occupational sectors are often characterised by poor pay and insecure working conditions. This is known as horizontal segregation. In addition, women are also typically segregated into a narrow range of occupational roles within the labour market. A particular imbalance existing in leadership roles, with men tending to dominate leadership/management roles and women concentrated in non-management roles. This is known as vertical segregation. The Nordic countries have greater horizontal segregation by sex than the rest of the European Union, that is, most women work in different occupations than most men. The gender segregation of labour is often seen as the main reason behind the gender wage gap in the Nordic region. It can also cause talent to go undetected and higher unemployment rates. Because of horizontal and vertical segregation, the career choices of young women who may enter the labour market with exactly the same qualifications and experiences as young men, are generally more constrained. In the longer term, they are also unlikely to achieve the same measure of success in their careers and/or earn the same money as men.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls and women

Perhaps because of this gender inequality in the labour market, women and girls are harder hit by economic impacts in times of crisis. They are more vulnerable than men because they typically earn less and occupy more insecure jobs with less access to social protection. Consequently, they are less able to absorb the economic shocks of a crisis than men. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic (2019 – ongoing), policy measures imposed by governments to prevent community transmission of infection, like school closures and social distancing measures, have increased the unpaid care and domestic load of women at home, making them less able to take on, or balance, paid work with their increased domestic responsibilities. The United Nations has stated that the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are significantly worse for women than for men since it has deepened pre-existing inequalities, exposed vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems which are, in turn, amplifying the impacts of the pandemic.

This recent deterioration in women's position in the labour market represents important, contemporary background labour market information for career guidance practitioners, when they are working with girls and women. Reliable and current labour market information has consistently documented all of these, and other relevant trends, in detail. The question remains: how can career guidance practitioners use these data constructively in their practice?

Challenges for career practice

The persistent inequality and disadvantages that women suffer in labour markets worldwide presents something of a conundrum for career guidance. Supposing a young girl, in a career guidance intervention, expresses an ambition to enter a particular occupational sector. The

career guidance practitioner is familiar with reliable and up-to-date labour market intelligence that indicates that sexual harassment and or workplace bullying are key features of that occupational sector.

Does the career guidance practitioner progress the interview by responding, neutrally, to the types of questions the young girl is likely to ask:

- What qualifications do I need?
- How can I get these qualifications?
- Is relevant work experience necessary and/or advantageous?
- What are my employment prospects immediately/long-term?
- How much will I earn? Now and in five/ten years?

Or, do they introduce relevant labour market information and intelligence, sensitively and constructively, in a way that indicates the likely nature of the work environment to which the young girl is aspiring, perhaps additionally discussing some strategies for combatting a hostile work environment?

Or, perhaps both types of information need to be used in a career guidance intervention? Existing labour market intelligence tells us that women are much more likely to be treated as sex objects when circumstances emphasise gender roles. Studies into the tourist industry, for example, have found that sexual harassment and sexualisation of women at work are deeply embedded. Even though women predominate in this sector, a culture exists (like the culture that was found to be prevalent in the media industry) where those interacting with female employees expect them to behave primarily as women; then as workers.

So what support should career guidance practitioners provide in these, and similar circumstances, with girls and women?

Ethical challenges for career guidance practice

When career guidance practitioners join professional associations, they are required to sign up to an ethical code of practice. The International Association of Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG), for example, details the ethical responsibilities of members to their clients. Four widely accepted principles underpinning codes of ethical practice are: beneficence; non-malfeasance; autonomy and justice. Beneficence implies taking some type of positive action on behalf of the clients, resulting in doing them some good. Non-malfeasance implies that the career guidance practitioners will ensure that no harm is done to the client. Justice requires the professional to act fairly, implicating the principles of equity and social justice. Autonomy assumes that the client has the right to be involved in decisions that will affect them. Since these four principles do not always exist in isolation, there is often a trade-off of one principle against another to deserve a professional service.

Beneficence and autonomy are the two principles most likely to be in conflict regarding career guidance support for industry sectors known for sexual harassment. For example, some governments, like England, exhort career guidance practitioners to encourage their clients into jobs where there are skill shortages. This is particularly the case when nations are in economic recovery from economic shocks, as a result, for example, of the recent pandemic. However, career guidance practitioners may not only risk compromising the core

value of impartiality in their practice, by following such recommendations. They may also risk compromising the ethical principle of beneficence since they may be instrumental in placing clients in occupational situations at high risk of sexual harassment. The ethical principle of autonomy is also implicated. To be empowered to make their own decisions, clients need access to accurate and relevant labour market intelligence when considering training and employment in both traditional and non-traditional areas. This should include knowledge and understanding of the prevalence of sexual harassment, within its legal framework.

The weight of evidence that now exists about the breadth and depth of sexual harassment, as well as the damage it causes to victims, across many occupational sectors means that allowing these phenomena to continue as an invisible issue for career guidance practice is no longer tenable.

Restrict patterns that preservice occupational segregation

A powerful mechanism for maintaining occupational segregation is sexual harassment, now recognised to be a major occupational health problem for victims. While this undoubtedly affects men as well as women, it is women who suffer most, with men more likely to be the perpetrators. Further, it has been found that men are more likely to sexually harass women who are working in non-traditional sectors (that is, those sectors in which men are predominantly employed, like construction, engineering, etc.).

The far-reaching consequences of the less powerful and less influential roles that the majority of women tend to occupy in the labour market, because of occupational segregation, have been powerfully exposed by the recent #MeToo movement. The international media storm created by this movement has not only increased awareness of sexual harassment in the media industry, but the tsunami of revelations of sexual misconduct that it exposed indicates the extent and depth of the incidence of sexual harassment across many occupational sectors other than the media, like the international legal profession, politics, elite sport (in the US) and even in not-for-profit organisations like the United Nations (UN). The extent and impact of these transgressions, together with the apparent lack of support for victims, challenges the core assumption inherent in career guidance practice that effective career guidance support can help individuals achieve their potential.

One of the implications for the practice of career guidance is that is has shone a spotlight on the negative consequences of sexual harassment and bullying for women in the workplace – a spotlight that cannot, and should not, be switched off. Awareness and understanding of this particular feature of women's employment experiences is relatively new. The term, sexual harassment, only started being defined a few decades ago, only recently becoming recognised as detrimental to the career progression of women and their well-being. The continuing fall-out from the #MeToo challenges career guidance practice to confront the realities of this labour market intelligence, by responding effectively and ethically in their practice.

Conclusion

If career guidance practice aims to help all clients achieve their potential, then the real, rather than imagined, needs of girls and women need to be understood. For decades, career guidance practice has been driven by theories than assume the needs of girls and women are the same as boys and men. Now we know better. Practice needs to integrate new theoretical concepts derived from the real experiences of girls and women.

The long-term labour market disadvantages suffered by women undoubtedly represents a social justice issue. Sexual harassment has emerged as a strong and recurrent theme in women's career progression. Career guidance potentially has an important role to play, both at the level of the individual client and at the level of structural causes. In these challenging and changing times, career guidance may need to rethink, reshape and refocus its practices to enhance visibility and effectiveness.

References below discuss many of these pivotal issues.

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Jenny Bimrose is Emeritus Professor at the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, England. With over 40 years of experience teaching, researching and managing in higher education, she has acted as consultant for the Council of Europe on careers guidance, as well as a trainer and consultant for many UK and International careers organisations. She was Head of Centre for Training in Careers Guidance at the University of East London for 22 years. Many research projects on which she has worked have focused on the theory and practice of career counselling and guidance, together with the career development of women. Ongoing research strands includes ways of supporting the use of ICT by professionals in careers and employment practice.

Distinctions between labour market information and intelligence:
Labour market information refers to raw, or hard, data about the labour market, typically statistics presented in tables, graphs, charts, etc.
Labour market intelligence is the interpretation of labour market information for different purposes – found most useful by career guidance practitioners. The distinctions between labour market information and intelligence are further discussed in Bimrose, J. (2021).