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In the service of neoliberal agenda? The neoliberal framing of gender equality in law firms in Finland

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to examine the construction of gender equality applying neoliberal goal of efficiency and a shift in the governance in the context of Finnish women lawyers' professional activity. The question explored is how gender equality is understood in this specific segment of the private sector; specifically law firms and legal work. Interview data with Finnish women attorneys are analyzed as embedded in the context of ongoing restructuration of working life and neoliberal project prevalent in the lawyers' workplaces.

The first part of the article discusses the background of the study which covers the Finnish state's intervention for the promotion of gender equality in the workplace via gender equality planning. The second part of the article draws on the critical frame analysis of empirical material to pinpoint the interviewees' neoliberal attitudes towards the understanding of gender equality.

The findings indicate that the neoliberal goal of efficiency which encroaches upon lawyers' work only reinforces the supposedly gender neutral norm that underpins a vision of gender equality. In addition, the neoliberal shift in governance from structures onto agency presents gender equality in terms of women's freedom of choice whether to excel in the professional performance. I further suggest that this interpretation of gender equality is stretched to be functional under the neoliberal commitment to economic growth achieved through enhancement of women lawyers' productivity.