



Committee on the situation
of women in economics

Newsletter 2023: Keynote Speaker Summary

Keynote Title: “Leadership and Aspirations”

Delivered by: Professor Ghazala Azmat (Sciences Po)

Summary report prepared by Judit Vall Castelló, on behalf of the COSME executive board

Professor Ghazala Azmat has talked about the lack of representation of women in top positions. Although she acknowledges that there has been a lot of progress in closing the gender gaps at all levels, even in high skill occupations and in leadership tracks, we still see this lack of representation at the very top. This is happening even despite the push in the corporate world to have more females in leadership positions: we have seen businesses putting forward arguments that diversity at the top is profitable, as it is linked with things like innovation and employee satisfaction, among others.

Therefore, it is quite puzzling to see that the entry level gap is closing and there is support for promoting female leaders in top positions but there is a lot of attrition in going up that ladder. Thus, Ghazala tries to understand what is going on along this process. She focuses on the legal sector and politics and analyzes career goals, aspirations and their interactions with investments, efforts and expectations. She is particularly interested in analyzing how these things come together and relate to each other in order to help us understand what’s going on along these career tracks.

She looks at these elements empirically and, through various research projects, she realizes the importance of aspirations in eventually making it to the top of these leadership positions. She finds that aspirations are strongly related to expectations and effort and they are also changeable; they are somewhat shaped by experiences in the work place and other factors, like family responsibilities, and support and constraints in the workplace.

When we asked her the difficult question of, in the event of having unlimited resources and unlimited political power, what does she think are the best policies to try to reduce and minimize these gender gaps that she uncovers in her research projects, she told us that, in light of her research, understanding the formation of these aspirations and the links to beliefs or expectations are an important first step to really understanding the glass ceilings and closing the gender gaps at the top leadership levels.

With respect to policies, her research has highlighted that there is scope to change these decisions and goals as well as the way in which they are linked to investments. She suggests that we may want to start to think about workplace culture, which can be discrimination in the workplace but also having more family friendly policies, either in the firm but also more generally, to try to lift these constraints that influence the rise to the top levels for females. Another aspect is having and offering more information to employees which can help in terms of shaping those beliefs and expectations for women.